

COOKING WITH WILD GAME

VOLUME
13

Author: **EDA**

Illust: **Kochimo**



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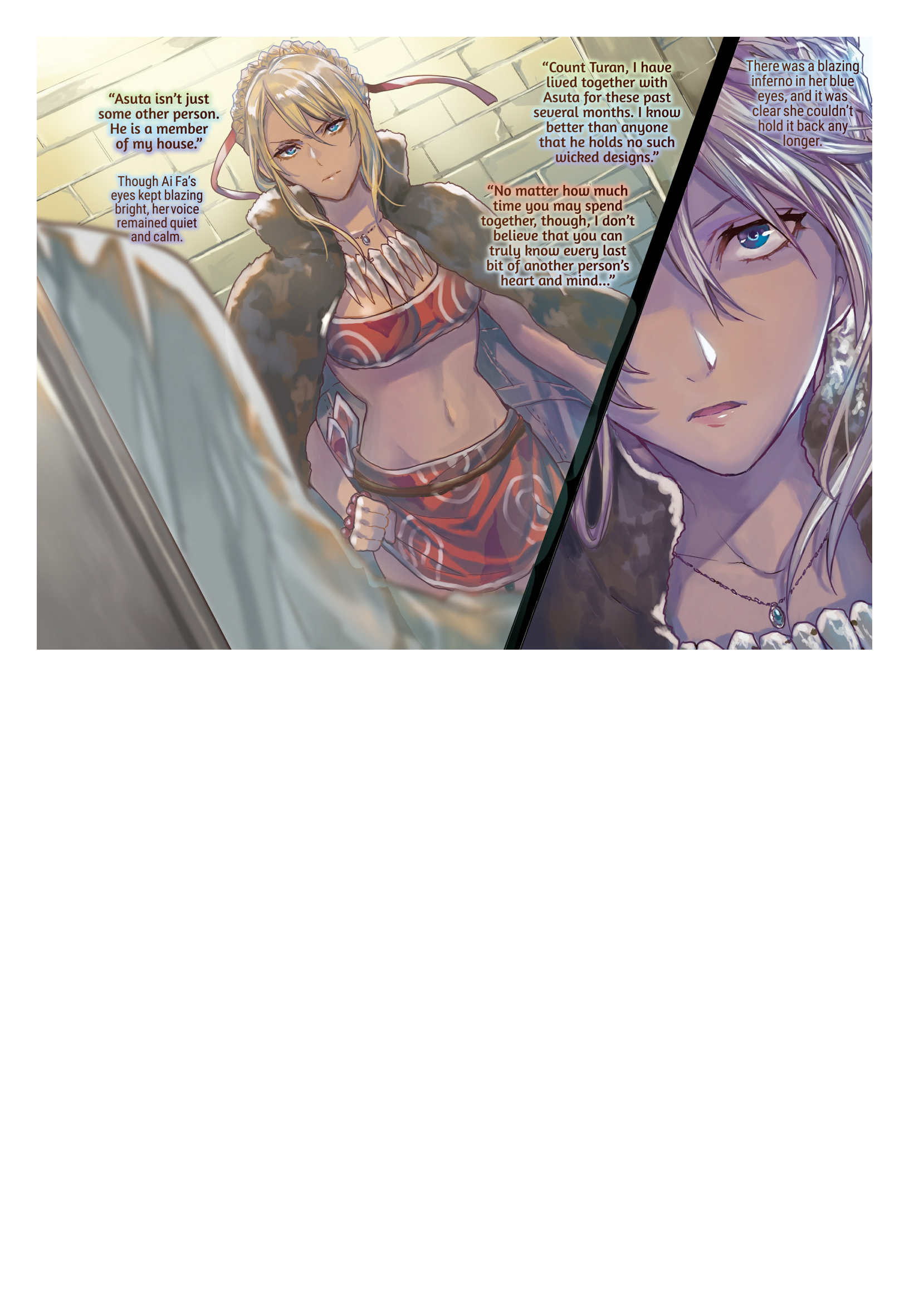
COOKING WITH WILD GAME

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“This is getting repetitive. What did you think I meant when I said I was putting my life on the line, eh?”

Bartha asked with a daring grin, brushing off Cyclaeus’s glare.



"Asuta isn't just some other person. He is a member of my house."

Though Ai Fa's eyes kept blazing bright, her voice remained quiet and calm.

"Count Turan, I have lived together with Asuta for these past several months. I know better than anyone that he holds no such wicked designs."

"No matter how much time you may spend together, though, I don't believe that you can truly know every last bit of another person's heart and mind..."

There was a blazing inferno in her blue eyes, and it was clear she couldn't hold it back any longer.

“Even so, you are still my father... And even if you did not care about me in the least, I am your daughter. That is why I have arranged this final parting meal for you.”



MENU

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Prologue

It was the fifteenth of the white month.

When I awoke with the rising of the sun, the first thing I saw was the adorable sleeping face of a boy right in front of me, which seriously caught me off guard.

His hair was a yellowish brown, and his features were gentle like a girl's... I was looking at the very familiar youngest son of the main Ruu house, Ludo Ruu.

Umm...?

As I stared at that cherubic face, I quickly searched back through my memories.

After the dinner with Zuuro Suun and everyone, Ai Fa and I went to the main Ruu house for the night, while Bartha joined Shin Ruu's family. Up till yesterday we had all been using the one vacant house in the Ruu settlement, but we had decided to let the former members of the main Suun house use it last night.

Shin and Ryada Ruu must have been taking turns guarding and watching over Bartha as she slept. And Gulaf Zaza's group who were also staying in the Ruu settlement had surely done the same for Zuuro Suun and company.

Then, there was me and Ai Fa.

The main Ruu house didn't have any spare rooms, so Ai Fa slept in Granny Jiba's room, while I slept in the boys' bedroom.

Up until now I had only slept separately from Ai Fa when I had to suffer being held prisoner for several days, which made for some real restless nights. But this time around I had a friend like Ludo Ruu to chat with, and at some point I'd apparently drifted off.

Currently, the gentle sunlight of early morning was streaming in through the window. Apparently even though he was an early riser as far as men went, even Ludo Ruu didn't get up at daybreak.

His face really is cute when he's sleeping... I thought in a sleepy daze, having

finally gotten things sorted out in my mind.

Ludo Ruu had an androgynous face to start with, so when he let loose an innocent smile, he was every bit as cute as a girl. But now that his lips were mumbling like a kid's as he peacefully slept, he looked positively adorable.

If I said that to him, though, he'd probably slug me.

Putting that thought behind me, I rolled so I was facing upward and gave a big stretch. Then I casually glanced over the other way, and was once again taken aback.

That was because Darmu Ruu of all people was lying there sleeping.

Now that I think about it, it's his room too...

Since the main Ruu family was so large, they generally slept two to a room. And as these two were the only unwed men in the house, it made sense for them to double up.

What *was* worth being astonished over, though, was what Darmu Ruu looked like asleep.

Naturally, his wild wolf eyes were currently hidden. And where normally his face was all tense in a way that made him seem unapproachable, now it was perfectly calm. Even the way his long black hair fell smoothly over his cheek and shoulder somehow looked very unlike him.

Now that I thought about it, if you took those scary eyes he got from his father out of the equation, Darmu Ruu had a pretty handsome face, even for a person of the forest's edge. And he really was Ludo Ruu's big brother too. His nose was high, his lips thin, and even when his cheeks were taut, they also somehow had a slim, gentle curve to them. While he wasn't as androgynous as Ludo Ruu or Rau Lea, he was still only nineteen years old—a fact that really hit me when I saw how gentle he appeared while sleeping.

I sorta feel like I'm looking at something I shouldn't see... I couldn't help but think, only for Darmu Ruu's eyelids to slowly rise.

With a half awake, murky gaze, he looked at me from up close and personal.

"What're you doing...?"

“Huh? Ah, um... I usually get up at daybreak.”

I couldn't help but break out in a cold sweat, but fortunately Darmu Ruu's eyelids slowly lowered back down.

“The men will all still be sleeping now... If you're awake, then go help the women or something...”

“Right. I'll just do that.”

I slowly got up, then opened the door and slipped out while making as little sound as I could manage.

And then before I could even catch my breath, the neighboring door was flung open.

“My, Asuta, you're up already...?”

“Good morning, Asuta.”

It was the oldest sister, Vina Ruu, and the second oldest, Reina Ruu. Apparently they had also woken up along with the sunrise.

“You can keep on sleeping, you know... We'll handle the washing...” Vina Ruu said while stifling a yawn. Even this early in the morning, her pheromones were still on full blast.

“Nah, I'm the sort who can't get back to sleep once I'm up, so I'll take care of some cooking preparations or—” I stopped short, suddenly remembering my business in the post town was on break for today.

After all, today was finally the meeting with Cyclopeus.

“For now, I guess let's head outside...?”

With that, we headed for the plaza as a group of three.

Along the way, we just happened to run into Ai Fa and Rimee Ruu coming out of the other hallway. Normally, Granny Tito Min shared a room with Granny Jiba, but since Ai Fa was sleeping there, Rimee Ruu had asked to switch bedrooms.

And before long, Granny Tito Min and Lala Ruu also exited their room too.

As we greeted one another good morning in whispered tones, we all left the

house.

“Oh my, I see you’re all together,” Mia Lea Ruu noted, having been waiting there for us as we stepped outside.

With that, all the women of the main house aside from Jiza Ruu’s wife Sati Lea Ruu had gathered. She must have been excused from morning work because she had to take care of her one-year-old son.

“Well then Vina, your group should take care of the washing. We’ll dry out the pico leaves, and then get to work on the firewood.”

“How about I help chop firewood, then?” I interjected, only for Mia Lea Ruu to blink in surprise.

“Ah right, your business in town is on break for today. In that case, you can just take it easy until we’re done with our morning chores. Then you can join us for gathering herbs and wood, right?”

“I owe you all for giving me a place to sleep day after day, so I’d like to help out a little if I can.”

“I see. If you’re really going to insist, then I guess we’ll have to give you something to do.”

And so, we all headed around to the back of the house together.

No matter how important of a day it might be, you still couldn’t afford to skip these daily tasks. As for what all that entailed, it didn’t really change between the Fa and Ruu houses. Washing the clothes and the dishes from dinner and drawing water to start with, gathering herbs and firewood before the giba woke up when the sun hit its peak, and then chopping the wood, managing the pantry, and making jerky. It all had to get done, every single day.

That wasn’t to say there was so much to do that it became overwhelming. They were just all important tasks that couldn’t be put off for later. It was relaxed but also solemn work, undertaken while gradually building the bonds between fellow clan members. That was how the women of the forest’s edge spent their days.

If our relationship with the nobles of Genos collapsed as a result of today’s

meeting, this beloved, peaceful, everyday routine would be blown to smithereens. And yet, the Ruu women all wore the same bright smiles as always while they worked.

There was little doubt in my mind that they all trusted Donda Ruu. No matter what occurred from here on out, they believed that man who served as their clan head and one of the leaders of their people would choose the best path possible leading forward.

On the off chance... Seriously, just the off chance, that the people of the forest's edge end up having to abandon Morga, then I'm sure everyone in the Ruu clan will keep following the path laid out by Donda Ruu wearing the exact same expressions on their faces, I thought as I walked along, only for Ai Fa to nonchalantly approach.

"Ah, Ai Fa, did you have a nice, long chat with Granny Jiba last night?"

"Yes," she nodded, her gaze steely for some reason.

"What's the matter? Nothing of note really happened on my end, you know."

"I see... That second son didn't try to do anything to you?"

"No, Darmu Ruu went right to sleep. Ludo Ruu and I just chatted for a bit."

"I see," Ai Fa repeated, but her gaze remained fixed on me.

"Seriously, what's up...? You look all worried about something."

"Worried, is it?" Ai Fa mumbled—unusual for her—and then she drew in close to my ear. "It's just... sleeping separately from you reminded me of those agonizing days of your absence, which disturbed my rest."

That admission made me shoot Ai Fa a look of shock.

And in response, she pouted back at me. "It seems you were able to sleep peacefully, unburdened by any such concerns."

"No, I was exactly the same way last night too. I was just too embarrassed to say so..." I quietly replied, only to receive an elbow jab to my side.

I wasn't quite sure what I had done to earn that. But at any rate, we still needed to overcome today's events in order to reclaim our everyday lives back

in the Fa house.

“My, you’re up too?” Mia Lea Ruu suddenly spoke up, sounding a bit surprised. That was because we had found Barthia just standing there behind the house. Her intimidating leonine face turned our way, and she shot us her usual bold grin.

“Ah, are you all getting to work already? If you’re chopping wood, I’ll help out.”

“I’m glad to hear it, but isn’t Tari Ruu or anyone with you?”

I wasn’t sure whether it was an order or a request, but Barthia had been told not to wander around the settlement on her own.

In response Barthia rustled her hair, looking rather apologetic.

“The thing is, I wanted to take some time by myself to think, so I went out for a bit of a stroll. But don’t go scolding that nice little lady, all right? I made her let me leave.”

“Hmm?” Mia Lea Ruu murmured with a questioning furrow of her brow. “It’s not as if we’re worried you’re up to anything. Is this something you felt you had to do?”

“Yeah, it was.”

There were a few moments of silence, after which Mia Lea Ruu broke out in a smile.

“Understood. Today will be a turning point for you too, so I hope you stand strong, Barthia.”

“Right. Thanks, Mia Lea Ruu.”

After giving a hearty nod, the Ruu matriarch turned toward Ai Fa.

“Well then, sorry, but could I ask you to help out with chopping wood instead of the washing, Ai Fa? Barthia can’t be given a hatchet without a hunter watching over her, after all. And then you can join us later to bathe.”

“Very well.”

With that, the young women headed off with everything that needed

washing, while the older crowd set about preparing to dry pico leaves.

As for me and Ai Fa, we joined Bartha chopping firewood.

After handing the woman a large hatchet, my clan head asked, “Is something the matter, Bartha of Masara? You seem worried. Do you have some sort of concern about the upcoming meeting with Cyclaeus?”

“I wouldn’t say that. I just had to work up my resolve. To face those nobles who ensnared my husband Goram, y’know?” Bartha said, grinning so wide you could see the white of her teeth. “At last night’s dinner, I got to see how resolved you all are. So I figured I needed to get myself good and ready to do what’s needed. Still, before all that, I wanted to see that idiot son of mine at least once...”

“Is that why you were wandering around the settlement alone?”

“You’re a sharp one! I figured he might show himself if nobody else was around, but it seems that fool hasn’t even realized I was invited here to the forest’s edge,” Bartha said, her gaze looking a bit distant. “Well, whatever. It’s not like anything would change if we saw each other. And I’ve got my own work to take care of... For my idiot son’s sake too.”

“Indeed. If we can just expose Cyclaeus’s crimes, things should finally become peaceful for us. All we wish for is to go back to the quietly passing days we used to enjoy.”

“The days you used to enjoy, eh? What a wonderful thought. I figure that’s something worth staking your life on.”

Bartha’s gaze grew even more distant as her eyes narrowed.

Though her expression remained perfectly calm, in her voice I could sense the titanic force of her resolve.

Chapter 1: The Hearing

1

And so, after completing our various tasks, we departed together from the Ruu settlement.

Since the group was just too large, we couldn't use the wagon. After all, we had the nine people participating in the meeting, Zuuro Suun's group of seven, and ten guards, making for twenty-six in total.

The nine attending the meeting were the three leading clan heads, Gazraan Rutim, the Fou and Beim clan heads, me and Ai Fa, and Bartha.

The group of seven whose crimes would be probed by Cyclaeus consisted of Zuuro Suun, Diga, Doddo, Mida, Yamiru Lea, Oura, and Tsuvai.

And the ten guards included the familiar faces of Darmu and Ludo Ruu, Dan Rutim, and Rau Lea, as well as two members each from the Zaza, Dom, and Jeen, making for a pretty elite unit.

Of particular note was the fact that both Gazraan and Dan Rutim would be participating.

The custom at the forest's edge was that in emergency situations, either the clan head or their heir was to stay behind to protect their home. Even last night, those participating in the meeting remained in the Ruu settlement to help keep an eye on Zuuro Suun and company, but Dan Rutim and Rau Lea temporarily returned home.

Today, however, was a unique case, so Dan Rutim was selected to be one of the guards under Donda Ruu's orders. Since we were treading into the unknown territory of the castle town, he decided it would be best to have the strongest formation possible.

Now that I thought about it, since even Ai Fa and Mida would be present, that meant seven of the top eight from the contest of strength held by the Ruu clan

would be there.

The only one missing would be Jiza Ruu, as he alone was staying back to protect the settlement. The safety of the hundred or so people under the Ruu clan was placed firmly on his shoulders as his father's heir. And Shin Ruu also wasn't chosen, so he would be remaining to carry out his own work too.

Still, those hunters from the north sure are overwhelming... I thought to myself as I walked down the path to the post town, surrounded by hunters and plenty of lush greenery.

The men around me were elites from the Zaza, Dom, and Jeen, clans from the north that had previously fallen under the Suun. They were said to be every bit as brave as the Ruu and their related clans, and they certainly looked impressive enough to fit that reputation.

"You don't have any objections to leaving Deek Dom and Dan Rutim in charge of the guard group, right?" Gulaf Zaza called out to Donda Ruu as we walked the trail.

Apparently Deek Dom referred to the Dom clan head, that muscular mountain of a man who wore a giba skull over his head. He had an even larger build than Donda Ruu and Gulaf Zaza, and his face and arms were covered in countless scars. Even after all this time I'd spent among the people of the forest's edge, I had to say he still had the most intimidating appearance of any of the hunters I had ever seen.

"With me and Deek Dom around, we'll have nothing to fear no matter how many hundreds of soldiers surround us!" Dan Rutim said with a hearty laugh, while his northern counterpart just silently watched him out of the corner of his eye. However, his black eyes were ablaze like flames underneath that giba skull.

Though the two of them really were polar opposites, I had trouble imagining a stronger combination. And it made me realize once again how precarious the fate of the forest's edge was, requiring us to use everything we had.

"I've been waiting for all of you, representatives from the forest's edge," Leito called out, having been waiting for us at the midpoint between the town and the forest.

Originally, Kamyua Yoshu had been the one to invite Barthia to stand as a witness. That was why Leito would be accompanying us in his place as we headed into the castle town.

“Melfried prepared a pass for Barthia, but he couldn’t mobilize the ducal guards for private business, so is it all right if we head to Cycloaeus’s manor together?”

“Hmph. So Kamyua Yoshu didn’t make it in the end...” Donda Ruu said.

“There’s still time before the sun hits its peak, so I can’t say anything for certain. I definitely hope he does make it, though.”

Naturally, there was no reason to turn down Leito’s request at this point. And so, we headed for the castle gates together.

Normally when Donda Ruu and the others went to one of these meetings, they would pass behind the thicket so as to attract as little attention as possible from the townsfolk, but that would prove difficult with such a large crowd.

“There’s no need to worry about attention. After all, while you were kidnapped by that noble’s daughter there was an even bigger crowd of our comrades in town.”

“Huh...? But today we’ve got Zuuro Suun and his family with us, right?”

Diga and Doddio had been unbound, while Zuuro Suun remained the only one today with his arms and legs restrained with leather straps. If we went and openly paraded him through the post town, it might impart the same fear and confusion the townsfolk had experienced when they saw Zattsu Suun being dragged along.

And then there was Mida. In the past, he had thrown ridiculous tantrums that left stalls destroyed when he didn’t like the cooking they served. Though he had lost a bit of excess fat by this point, I doubted any of the townsfolk would fail to recognize him.

“I said there’s no need to worry about that. Don’t make me repeat the same line again and again,” Donda Ruu grumbled, then turned toward his comrades. “Zuuro Suun’s group, get in the center of the lineup. And Asuta of the Fa clan, you stay with the women.”

“Got it.”

It was then I finally realized how essential those measures were.

Would the people of the post town be willing to forgive the lawless actions of the Suun clan, or no? Just like Gazraan Rutim had once said, it wouldn't just be the lord of Genos deciding that. This was also an unavoidable moment of judgment for them.

Looking at him now, Zuuro Suun's big toad-like mouth was open wide, puffing and panting, as if he had been made to march through the mountains. And Diga and Doddo were both staring down at their feet with worried looks.

Diga had been afraid of the townsfolk to begin with, and Doddo was every bit as weak-willed when he didn't have booze in him to give him courage. But their eyes seemed to be showing a lot more life in them now when compared to how they were before last night's dinner.

On the other hand, the women looked firmly resolute. That of course went for Yamiru Lea and Tsvai, but even the usually helpless-looking Oura was solemnly holding her head high and seemed to be facing her fate head on.

“Let's go.”

After slipping through an alley between buildings, our group that had grown to twenty-seven with Leito set foot on the stone highway.

There was only half an hour or so left until the sun would hit its peak, so it was around the point that the town started bustling.

Perhaps it was only natural, but I sensed fear and confusion quickly roiling in the air throughout the street.

Since he was surrounded by so many hunters, it was possible they weren't really seeing Zuuro Suun. And in fact, I sensed there was more shock coming from the sight of the hunters from the north, wearing their giba pelts with heads or skulls on top.

The Zaza and Dom settlements were located far away from the post town. Even now that we had wagons, it was still surely only the women who came to town. And so, it might well have been decades since any hunters from the north

were seen around the post town.

Even driven into the center of the group, Mida's huge frame still peeked out more than half a head over everyone else. Zattsu and Tei Suun had mostly kept their wicked deeds outside of Genos proper, so in recent years the ones menacing the townsfolk had been Mida and Doddó. And since Mida had gone on rampages while looking so unusual to begin with, he had surely engraved a deep sense of terror into plenty of minds.

The young women and old folks present looked ready to shriek, and some even collapsed to their knees. Even plenty of the southerners, who tended not to be as prejudiced as westerners, stood there looking startled by Mida's appearance.

As those feelings of fear and confusion washed over us, the hunters of the forest's edge just strode down the stone street. And the guards patrolling the post town showed no signs of approaching.

Th-That's...

After progressing for a bit, we came across a familiar figure: the owner of The Kimyuus's Tail, Milano Mas. He was standing in front of his inn, looking our way with an intense gaze.

All the criminals had died out, and those left weren't guilty... Milano Mas said something like that, but Zuuro Suun and his former family were the direct descendents of those criminals. Just what sort of emotions were whirling about in the man's chest right now?

A little bit farther down the road we approached the area with the stalls, where we found Yang setting up for business. The face of the girl helping him went completely pale as she froze in place, while the chef himself looked our way in surprise.

Yang was a chef in the castle town, and he didn't exactly have fond feelings toward Cycloeus. He wasn't involved directly in the discord between us people of the forest's edge and that wicked noble, but he had likely at least heard a summary of what was going on from his employer, Polarth.

But even while Yang was going rather pale himself, I noticed him scanning the

crowd for me and sending a firm nod my way. I nodded back over Ai Fa and Ludo Ruu's shoulders.

After that, the end of the post town finally came into view... along with a single man leaping out in front of us.

It was the vegetable seller, Dora.

Donda Ruu was standing at the head of our group, so he was the one to stop and raise his right arm for everyone else to do the same.

"Y-You're Donda Ruu, one of the leading clan heads of the forest's edge, right? D-Do you remember me? I met you a number of times back when Asuta was kidnapped, but still..."

Even Dora's face was looking pale. He was a large, fairly strong-looking man, but when faced with a group like this, he looked like a pitiful little puppy.

After exchanging a look with Ai Fa in the center of the cluster, she and I hurried over that way, while the conversation continued on.

"I don't recall hearing your name, but you're a vegetable seller from around these parts, aren't you?"

"Y-Yes, that's right. I grow vegetables on the Daleim plantations and sell them, and my name is Dora. Your son and daughters have been kind enough to favor my business."

"In that case... You grow and sell the aria and poitan we always eat," Donda Ruu replied in his deep tone, standing there imposingly.

The passing crowd watched with bated breath as the two continued talking.

"R-Right. My shop has been thriving thanks to Asuta and the folks from your Ruu clan buying so many vegetables. I-I hope to keep doing business with all of you in the future, Donda Ruu..."

At that point, Ai Fa and I finally managed to make it to Donda Ruu's side.

Seeing that, Dora listlessly shot us a smile, his well muscled body trembling lightly.

"We want to keep on living as we have been too... And if things are going to

change, we want it to be in a good way,” Donda Ruu replied. “That’s why we’ve come to today’s meeting. If things go well, I’ll be sending my daughters to buy vegetables from you again before long.”

“I’ll be praying from the depths of my heart that that’s how things turn out. May the divine protection of the western god Selva be with you... And Asuta, you and all your people better give it your best, all right?”

“Right. Thank you.”

With that, Dora backed away, and Donda Ruu continued on as if nothing had happened.

And as her father watched us leave, Tara clung to his leg. I turned my neck and kept on staring at the two of them until they disappeared from view.

Will we be able to keep on interacting with folks from the post town like we have up till now...? That’s riding on today’s meeting too.

And as we moved out of the post town, there was a scattering of trees on either side of the road. Continuing further north we came across another road to the west, which led to the castle town. While we had been seeing glimpses of the castle walls through the gaps between the trees, they had now come into clear view.

The stone walls were around six or seven meters high, and surrounded the castle town. This was my first time seeing them while it was still bright out.

They stretched out seemingly without end to the west alongside the highway, but once we advanced around twenty meters, we finally saw the gates. They were massive, like a mouth left gaping wide in an arch shape. And atop the drawbridge leading to the gateway, there were wealthy-looking merchants and old folks in frocks coming and going, protected by soldiers and the like.

Then, when we at last reached the base of the drawbridge, a large group appeared from the thicket to the south.

“We’ve been waiting for you, leading clan heads,” one of them said, walking up to Gulaf Zaza.

The large young man also wore a giba pelt with the head still attached. This

was the eldest son of the main Jeen house. And the thirty or so men he had behind him were all hunters of the forest's edge. They were a mixed group that had hurried over from the Zaza, Jeen, and Sauti settlements.

Their duty was to keep watch and make sure the castle town's militia wasn't making any strange moves, and also to wait for the leading clan heads to safely return to them. Donda Ruu and the other heads were prepared even for the possibility that Cyclopeus might launch an attack on the settlement at the forest's edge while they were away in the castle town.

"Apparently here in the castle town, they ring the bell six times between when the sun hits its peak and when it sets. If the meeting doesn't look like it'll be over before the third bell, we'll send one of the guards as a messenger, so wait here for them."

"Understood."

With that, the hunters disappeared again into the thicket.

And then, as if waiting for that moment, a single soldier approached across the drawbridge.

"We have been awaiting you, leading clan heads of the forest's edge."

The large man, Jimon, had the crest of the Turan house engraved on his breastplate. Though he had acted so arrogantly in front of me and Ludo Ruu, his tone and attitude had shifted when faced with the leading clan heads.

"I am the captain of Count Turan's first guard unit, Jimon, and I shall lead you to the count's manor. There are eight participants in the meeting, seven criminals whose crimes shall be tried, and ten guards accompanying you, correct?"

"Your numbers aren't wrong, but there's one thing I'd like to revise. Only one of those seven can rightly be called a criminal. We'll be assessing the crimes of the other six today, won't we?"

"My apologies for misspeaking..." Jimon said, expressionlessly bowing his head.

I found it difficult to imagine what he must be feeling, faced with so many

hunters.

“And we’ve got two extra tagging along, as well. It’s not our job to handle them, though,” Donda Ruu added, at which point Leito and Bartha stepped forward.

“We were invited by the leader of the ducal guard, Sir Melfried, to participate in today’s meeting. We have passes prepared, so we ask that you guide us too.”

“The count also informed me of that matter,” Jimon said as he gestured toward the drawbridge with his right hand. “The passes for your leaders have been prepared, so please board the tolos wagons over that way.”

“Tolos wagons?”

Looking where he directed, I saw that there were indeed a number of wagons slowly approaching. In fact, there were four somewhat large ones, each drawn by two tolos. They were built in a sealed box shape, and naturally the Turan emblem was clearly displayed on their sides.

“You certainly went through some trouble, preparing wagons for us. Did you mistake us for noble ladies or something?”

“No. But it would take some time to make it to the manor from the gates on foot, and besides...it wouldn’t do to needlessly upset the residents of the castle town,” Jimon politely responded, to which Donda Ruu gave a displeased snort.

“Each wagon can seat up to ten, so please board as best suits you.”

“Hmph...”

Naturally, we split up so that the hunters equipped with their blades were evenly distributed alongside those of us who were defenseless. I ended up riding alongside Ai Fa, Ludo and Darmu Ruu, Bartha, and Leito. We took our seats with three each on either bench, facing one another across the truly spacious wagon interior. With Ai Fa and Ludo Ruu now on either side of me, I called out to the driver, “Um, is it all right if we pull back the cloth covering this window?”

“As you wish...” the man replied in a slightly trembling voice. Apparently he wasn’t as successful at suppressing his emotions as Jimon.

At any rate, though, I went ahead and pulled back the curtain on the little window.

“Yeah, it just puts me on edge, not being able to see my surroundings,” Bartha said from the opposite seat as she did the same. She had her crescent-shaped blade hanging from her hip again, marking her as one of the combat-ready members of the group.

“Well then, let us be off!” Jimon ordered, at which point the totos wagons started crossing the drawbridge one by one.

Slowly but steadily, the thicket where our comrades were hiding vanished into the distance.

It's finally time...

At last, we would be settling things.

Our relationship with Genos had become complex and twisted, and I had no idea how much that could be improved today alone.

But Kamyua Yoshu had formed his plan to use Bartha as a foundation to build a case that would expose Cyclaeus's old crimes, and the leading clan heads had determined this was the day we'd settle everything.

This meeting would determine whether Cyclaeus, and in turn Duke Marstein Genos, were worthy of the people of the forest's edge offering up their blades in service.

And so with all sorts of thoughts and emotions burning bright inside of us, we finally passed through the gates to the Genos castle town.

2

So this is the Genos castle town, huh? As my body rocked along with the wagon, I got to see what the place looked like clearly for the first time.

People called it the city of stone, which was fitting, since that's what not only the road but also the buildings were made of. The road was wide, and the structures were large. Though there were occasionally some trees lined up alongside the road, there was hardly any dirt to be seen. And everyone passing

by looked real well off too.

Still, foreign merchants like Shumiral and Diel were also permitted to come and go here. Thanks to that, there were plenty of southern merchants with tolos pulling heavy-looking luggage, as well as easterners whose faces were completely hidden under their hoods.

And even among the westerners dressed up all nice and proper, the majority of them still looked to be merchants. Perhaps this area nearest to the gates was some sort of trade district.

As we advanced farther we approached a plaza with a large fountain, and I spied stalls set up there.

Well, I guess even the residents of the castle town need to earn a living.

A town this big had to have thousands of residents, or maybe even tens of thousands. And only a handful of them were nobles.

There was a man selling mountains of vegetables piled high.

A woman had laid out beautiful fabrics to attract the attention of passersby. Children bit into red fruits while running about the fountain.

There was a vivid energy to the place, like these people were all celebrating the peace they enjoyed.

And it's not like the people of the forest's edge want to take away their tranquility.

In fact, the hunters undertook the dangerous task of taking down giba precisely to protect that peace and prosperity.

Only the Turan and Daleim lands had large-scale fields here in Genos. That meant the people of the castle town had to bring food in from outside the stone walls in order to satisfy their hunger.

Fuwano, superior fruit wine, and all sorts of first-class vegetables that commanded higher prices came here to the castle town. Someone had once grumbled that the post town only had stuff like sour tarapa, while the more expensive and less sour foods were all bought up by folks in these stone walls.

That's not necessarily a problem. But...when they hole up inside these stone walls, do they even really know how much their prosperous lives are supported by the people of the forest's edge?

Of course, it wasn't like the hunters were working so hard to be given awards or words of gratitude.

Anyway, Ai Fa stared out the window together with me, but the sights didn't seem to be leaving any real deep impression on her.

Still, I couldn't help but find it all a bit hard to understand.

Even if Cyclaeus is an outlier, what exactly does the lord of Genos think about all this? Does he just not care about anything else as long as things are peaceful and prosperous inside these stone walls?

The totos wagon just kept on moving down the road, caring nothing for my concerns. And before long, we stopped in front of the manor.

"We've arrived..." the driver declared, and the door in the rear swung wide open.

We all exited the wagon together. The ground below our feet was paved in stone, and the manor towering over us was made from the same stuff too.

This was the Turan manor, the place where I had been imprisoned up until six days ago. And yet, this was my first time seeing it while it was bright out.

It might have been more accurate to say that the large building was constructed from grey bricks rather than stone, though the gabled roof was a strangely vivid shade of yellow. Now that I thought back on it, I was pretty sure Shumiral had once described the Turan residence as a yellow manor.

The building stretched out with two imposing square wings on the left and right. The center alone was four stories high, while the wings were each three. The structure on the right was where Lefreya had held me captive.

On the way here we had seen plenty of buildings throughout the castle town, but we hadn't passed anything as imposing as this one. Comparing it to something I was familiar with, it was likely on the same scale as a school building.

Cyclaeus's manor was also surrounded by stone walls that looked to be four or five meters high. We were currently on the inside of them, with our four wagons and crowd of nearly thirty standing in the vast courtyard with room to spare.

The stone path continued straight up to the building, with a lush lawn stretching out to either side of it. And during the night, guard dogs were let loose in this space.

Still, it's hard to believe a family of just two is living in such a huge building... It's like they prepared such a huge house just for all the servants and soldiers they employ, I thought to myself.

Jimon then directed us, "This way, please," as he started walking toward the manor.

The leading clan heads went first, while the rest of us followed after.

There were two soldiers standing guard in front of what looked to be the front door, brandishing long spears with silvery heads. And when Jimon stopped several steps in front of them, one of the soldiers went and pulled open the heavy-looking door.

"Please, come inside," Jimon stated as he went to continue onwards.

However, Donda Ruu didn't budge. "Hold on. Only the folks participating in the meeting will be continuing on past this point."

"What do you mean, exactly? We've prepared a waiting room for your bodyguards."

The one to answer Jimon's question was instead Dan Rutim, who was standing right behind Donda Ruu.

"If we pass through this door, we'll have to hand over our blades, right? We can't exactly do our duty as bodyguards like that! So let us stay here instead."

"But... I do not see how you could guard the leading clan heads if you're not by their side..."

"Don't you worry! We'll protect them just fine, along with everyone in this building!" Dan Rutim replied with a hearty chuckle.

“I see,” Jimon replied with a small nod. “In that case, we will leave a guard unit of several men here with you, so I ask that you follow their instructions from here on out. Is that acceptable?”

“Yeah, of course!”

“Very well, then... Leading clan heads and company, please come this way.”

As we left them all behind, Dan Rutim was grinning, Ludo Ruu looked serious, and Darmu Ruu and Deek Dom had a dangerous gleam shining in their eyes. But at any rate, our group went ahead and stepped into the manor.

The first thing to greet us was the vast entrance hall. At our feet, there was a reddish-brown rug already laid out. And as we all stepped onto it, the door closed behind us with a weighty sound.

“Welcome, everyone...” greeted the ten pages waiting there for us, all dressed in yellow uniforms.

They had a skin color typical of westerners, and were boys who looked to be even younger than me. But perhaps due to all the training they had undergone, they all stood there in a row with their gazes cast downward, their faces all as still as masks.

“We will take charge of your blades...”

With that, a number of them politely held out their hands, and the hunters all silently handed over the weapons at their hips.

“Shall we also take your cloaks?”

“No thanks. These are a hunter’s pride.”

Donda Ruu’s voice sounded even calmer than usual, but it was enough to cause the boy who had asked to flinch and cower a bit.

After giving the boy a glance, the clan head turned around to face his comrades.

“If you’ve got any metal skewers or small knives in your cloaks, hand those over too. As long as we don’t have anything that can serve as a weapon, nobody can complain.”

At that, the hunters followed his instructions and pulled out everything applicable.

And so, everyone was left unarmed. While we had been prepared for that from the start, I could still definitely feel my heartbeat quicken a bit.

“Well then, this way,” Jimon gestured, then started leading us down the carpeted hallway.

As we advanced to the left, the path suddenly narrowed and took on a maze-like structure. That meant we had crossed over into the left wing of the house. And though this part of the building was unexplored territory for me, the cramped, dimly-lit conditions stirred up some intense *déjà vu*.

Though there were countless doors along the walls, we ignored all of them and just kept following the path, taking both left and right turns. Was the route so complex in order to throw off intruders?

Slowly but steadily, we were growing more and more distant from Dan Rutim’s group outside the manor. However, I had already informed Donda Ruu of how Cyclaeus’s manor was structured in advance. On top of that, Dan Rutim’s group was standing by on the outside, so there should be no reason to worry...but my heart rate just kept on rising.

Eventually, we at last reached a spiral staircase made of bricks.

After climbing it, we continued a bit further down the hall, at which point Jimon finally stopped. Sure enough, there were once again two soldiers brandishing spears in front of the ostentatiously large door.

As he stood in front of them, Jimon announced, “The visitors from the forest’s edge have arrived!”

There was some muffled reply, and after hearing it Jimon pulled the door open. After that, he strode inside without any hesitation, and we followed right on after him.

At last, we were standing before Cyclaeus again.

“You have my thanks for coming, leading clan heads of the forest’s edge... I’m truly sorry for making you come all the way here on account of my own

personal concerns,” the wicked noble greeted hoarsely.

The large reception hall looked to be a square of around ten meters on each side.

Unsurprisingly there was reddish brown carpet laid out atop the floor, and there were large partitioning screens along the left and right walls, while straight ahead hung what looked like a thick curtain. And Cyclaeus was sitting there in front of that massive curtain embroidered with the emblem of the house of Turan.

“I had heard you weren’t doing well, but I’m glad to see you have enough strength left to speak,” Dari Sauti replied in a blunt tone as he looked around the room.

Following his lead, I also stole some peeks around.

While it was certainly luxurious, the room also felt somehow dreary. The partitioning screens, curtain, and carpet all looked clearly high quality, but the only other furnishings seemed to be just enough stools for the people present. If there were at least some sort of big conference table or something in the center it’d seem about right, but as it was, it felt strangely empty.

Straight in front of us were Cyclaeus and another man I didn’t recognize, while a few meters away, Melfried and another unfamiliar white haired older fellow sat facing toward the master of the house.

“Beside me is the leader of the militia, Ciluel, while the legal officer of Genos, Sir Zylus, is there beside Lord Melfried.”

So that’s Cyclaeus’s younger brother, huh? I thought to myself, my attention first turning straight ahead.

The middle-aged man wore simple white armor over his large frame. His nose really stood out with how short and flat it was, and something about his face just screamed contempt. But when you added in the fact that he wore his dark brown hair in a mushroom-looking bowl cut, it made for a sort of comical appearance.

As for his age, he was probably somewhere in his forties. And honestly, he didn’t look anything like Cyclaeus, who had the appearance of a gaunt old man.

The only thing that was similar between them was the tenacious shine in his pale eyes.

Meanwhile, that Zylus man was a skinny old fellow with a golden accessory hanging from the breast of his long white frock. I could only see the side of his face from where I was looking, but he seemed to be silently fuming.

“At Lord Melfried’s request, both Ciluel and Sir Zylus shall be participating. You have no objections to that, do you, leading clan heads...?”

Donda Ruu just silently nodded. After all, he had already heard of that matter from Leito.

Kamyua Yoshu’s plan was that by having Cyclaeus’s co-conspirator Ciluel and the man most well versed in the laws of Genos in one room, we would finally be able to bring the wicked noble’s crimes to light.

However, Kamyua Yoshu himself was absent. Would we still be able to fight properly alongside Melfried without him around? While nursing that worry, I snuck a glance at our noble ally.

Though I had heard Gazraan Rutim describe it, this was actually my first time seeing his face without the helmet. His hair was a medium brown, the bridge of his nose was straight, and his jaw was firm and lean. He was definitely more handsome than I had imagined, with a really fitting appearance for a noble. With his toned, tall, and lean body clad in white armor, he looked like a seriously admirable warrior.

However, the light in his grey eyes really was chilly in a way that felt almost reptilian. It was a cold light, but in a way completely different than Yamiru Lea’s had once been.

“Well then, you may start by seating yourselves, leading clan heads of the forest’s edge...” Cyclaeus urged, only for Dari Sauti to furrow his brow.

“I’m grateful for the consideration, but we people of the forest’s edge have no custom of sitting on such things.”

“You’ve said as much before... But since today’s meeting shall be rather time consuming, could I ask that you follow the customs of Genos? It is difficult to relax when you are the only ones sitting, after all.”

Dari Sauti seemed like he was about to object further, but he apparently rethought it and followed along with Cyclaeus's request. And then the rest of us followed soon after.

Our seats were simple wooden stools, lacking even backs. And since Cyclaeus and his brother were sitting in big chairs with not only backs but also armrests, the sort of thrones you'd expect to see a king in, it really made it feel like they were looking down on us right from the very start.

On top of that, since we had such a big crowd, our seats were all spread out in a half circle stretching from left to right and facing the distant Cyclaeus and Ciluel.

Melfried and Zylus had been seated to the right to start with and Bartha and Leito joined them there alongside me and Ai Fa, while the leading clan heads' group of six took the left, and Zuuro Suun and company were seated in the center.

"Well then, please summon me if you have need for my services," Jimon stated, exiting the room after seeing us seated.

With that, I finally identified the source of the vague unease I had been feeling: There weren't any soldiers guarding Cyclaeus.

I had heard the man had brought along twenty men to protect him at the last meeting, but now even his close aide Jimon had withdrawn. The only one left at his side now was his sluggish-looking younger brother.

"Don't let your guard down, Asuta... The soldiers appear to be hidden behind that massive curtain," Ai Fa whispered into my ear, apparently having sensed my concern. "There are twenty of them... No, it may actually be more. But no matter how much they may hold their breath, they are not able to fully hide their presence."

"I see. So they're trying to catch us off guard by hiding, huh?"

"If that is the case, then I cannot call it anything but a ridiculous farce. Still, it seems even that Melfried man was not permitted to come here with a blade."

In shock, I stole a glance at Melfried, who was seated next to Bartha. Sure enough, while the man himself was seated atop the stool with perfect posture,

there was no sign of his trademark twin longswords.

“I believe in the last meeting, both that man and Kamyua Yoshu were permitted to keep their blades on them... It may simply be that customs differ between the Turan land and the castle town, but at any rate, make certain to stay on guard.”

There were twenty or more soldiers hidden there behind Cyclaeus, likely all fully equipped. Compared to them, we had seven hunters of the forest’s edge, or eight if you included Mida in their number, and Bartha and Melfried seemed fairly strong too, but they were all barehanded. If things got violent under these circumstances, could it really end without bloodshed?

Either way, I definitely couldn’t wipe away the unease I was feeling.

And around then, Dari Sauti suddenly let out an “Ah!” At the same time, a strange smell wafted through the air, making it all the way to us.

“What is that unusual odor?!” Ciluel shouted in his hoarse voice.

“My apologies. It seems as I went to sit, I crushed a giba warding fruit.”

“A-A giba warding fruit, you say?!”

“Indeed. It is a rare fruit known throughout our Sauti clan. Since sprinkling its juice around will keep away giba for half a day, it’s quite valuable, so this is quite a blunder on my part.”

It was a real pungent aroma, and I couldn’t exactly say I was fond of it myself.

“Do not worry, as it is not harmful to humans. However, perhaps it would be wise to open up any windows and let in fresh air.”

“As the sun is currently high in the sky, all the windows are already open... Do not worry yourself and simply be seated, leading clan head of the forest’s edge,” Cyclaeus mediated with a sickly sweet grin.

Dari Sauti had been starting to stand, but to that he replied, “I see,” and sat back down.

The windows seemed to be on the opposite side of the partitioning screens to our right. There were small windows high up on the walls too, which meant the room was at least somewhat lit, and it did in fact seem like the air was

ventilating.

Still, that giba warding fruit really had a powerful scent, to the point that I felt like I was going to choke on it.

“A month ago, we used this same giba warding fruit when leading that group pretending to be a merchant caravan. But the other side used enough giba summoning fruit to completely overwhelm it, making our efforts pointless. A truly frustrating incident.”

“There is no need to rush. After all, the midday bell still hasn’t yet rung. For today, why not talk to our hearts’ content, until all unfortunate misunderstandings have been cleared away...?” Cyclaeus chimed in, the same grin still on his face.

He was still just as sickly pale as always, but other than that, he didn’t look to be in bad health. However, the way he supported his frail body on the armrest did make him look a bit weak.

“Still... I don’t seem to see that accursed blond scoundrel who whispered such slander into Lord Melfried’s ear,” Cyclaeus said, his tenacious gaze turning toward the younger noble. “For him to throw such false accusations at Ciluel, only to then hide himself... I must say, it is both a let-down and also quite upsetting. Lord Melfried, what exactly are your thoughts on that matter?”

“I cannot say I find it especially troublesome. Kamyua Yoshu himself had said he may not make it in time for this meeting, and as you can see, his representative is included here in our midst.”

Leito just grinned, while Bartha’s glare remained fixed straight ahead.

And I didn’t miss it either when Bartha muttered quietly, “I see... So that’s how it is.”

Her voice had likely only reached those seated on the same side as her, like Ai Fa. But at any rate, she kept on glaring with a hunter’s grin not at Cyclaeus, but at his brother who was seated next to him.

“This is utterly ridiculous! To think, some wanderer who just happened to make the acquaintance of Duke Genos would be allowed to slander my brother and myself, of all people!” Ciluel shouted again in his hoarse voice. “I have

countless responsibilities as the head of the militia, you know! Unlike the ducal guard tasked solely with keeping the peace inside the castle! Don't you agree, Lord Melfried?"

Melfried offered no response, simply staring back at Ciluel with his chilly grey eyes.

Still seated, the militia head stomped his feet like a child.

"Hmph, so be it. That wanderer's crafty plots end today! And you may be the first son of Duke Genos, but the crime of falling for that vulgar man's reckless remarks is grave indeed, Lord Melfried."

"That's quite enough vain words from you for now, Ciluel... After all, we will be bringing the entirety of the truth to light today," Cyclaeus stated, right before the heavy gong of a bell sounded out from the distance.

The sun had finally hit its peak.

"Well then, shall we get this meeting started...?" Cyclaeus asked, his bluish-gray face twisted into an eerie grin.

3

"Firstly, allow me to begin by conveying the words of Duke Marstein Genos... He stated that there are two concerns that must be cleared up in today's meeting," Cyclaeus said, showing us the back of his hand and raising his index finger. "Firstly, we must lay out clearly just how heavy of a punishment the members of the Suun clan must face for the crime of pillaging the forest of Morga, according to the laws of Genos."

The Suun group of seven all sat there perfectly still as they listened to Cyclaeus's words. Zuuro Suun himself hung his head, Diga and Doddo looked perplexed at being in a noble's manor for the first time, Yamiru Lea and Oura were expressionless, Tsuvai was pouting, and Mida... Mida wore the same absentminded look as always.

"And secondly..." Cyclaeus stated, now raising his middle finger. "The background and objective of Asuta of the Fa clan, this man from overseas who calls himself a person of the forest's edge, must be made clear. The duke has

stated that these two points cannot be overlooked.”

“Hmph. So you’re saying Duke Genos doesn’t care in the least about our concerns as to whether you yourself are guilty, Count Turan?” Dari Sauti asked, clearly displeased.

Cyclaeus just kept grinning away.

“Worry not, leading clan head of the forest’s edge. It is my belief that all of those matters are connected. When we stand up from these seats today, there shall be true understanding and empathy shared between us.”

“If such a time comes, we shall also give our unending thanks to our mother forest and the western god,” Dari Sauti replied with a shrug of his bulky shoulders.

Then, Cyclaeus’s gaze slowly shifted, going straight past Zuuro Suun’s group and fixating right on me.

“Well then, let us begin with the interrogation of this Asuta of the Fa clan...” At that, I sat up straight and looked right back at the wicked noble. “Asuta of the Fa clan, the other day my daughter committed a terrible act of misconduct... But by a twist of fate, that in turn brought your lineage to our attention. You are not a child of Amusehorn, the continent created by the four great gods, but rather a visitor from overseas... There is no mistake there, correct?”

“Right. I never put it quite that way myself, but it’s a fact that I wasn’t born on this continent.”

“Hmm... It is true that visitors from overseas do not call themselves as such. So shall we follow the customs of your people and instead refer to you as a man of the dragon god?”

“A... man of the dragon god?”

“You visitors from overseas revere the ruler of the seas, the dragon god... That is why you refer to yourselves as the people of the dragon god, is it not?”

This was my first time ever hearing that name.

Figuring I had no choice but to tell the truth at this point, I worked up my

resolve while adjusting my posture atop the uncomfortable stool.

“I was born in an island nation outside of this continent, but I can’t say I’ve ever worshiped the dragon god or called myself one of its people. So in that way, I guess you could say I’m *not* one of those visitors from overseas you’re referring to.”

“You are not...a visitor from overseas?” Cyclaeus’s small eyes seemed to ignite.

And beside him, Ciluel shouted, “That’s ridiculous! The only ones who come from over the seas are people of the dragon god! Don’t go thinking you can deceive us with such drivel, you brat!”

“I’m really not trying to deceive anyone.”

“Hmph! I’ve heard tell that you visitors from overseas are the same as the people of Mahyudra at your core! Legends say that in ancient times, folks from Mahyudra abandoned the continent and became children of the dragon god! That is why they only try to do business with Mahyudra and Sym! If the blood of Mahyudra runs in your veins, that may as well make you our sworn enemy, no matter what you may call yourself!”

Since I didn’t know anything about all that, I held my tongue.

Still, this just made it all the more important that I prove my innocence.

Before I could raise an objection, though, Cyclaeus moved to restrain his raging younger brother.

“Yet that legend also says that most of those visitors from overseas have appearances similar to the citizens of Mahyudra... Massive brutes with golden hair, purple eyes, and skin that appears sunburned... That is the appearance of visitors from overseas I have heard spoken of.” Cyclaeus’s eerie gaze remained fixed right on me. “However, you have black hair and eyes like a citizen of Sym, and also the skin color of a westerner. In that case... Are you truly not a man of the dragon god...?”

“That’s right. I was born in an island nation called Japan, and I don’t think my people have ever been called children of the dragon god.”

“Japan...? And where exactly is this island nation of yours located...?”

“I don’t know myself. I’m not even sure how, and it wasn’t by my own choice, but I found myself here in the middle of the continent,” I replied. And I couldn’t help but be concerned with how Cyclaeus was acting all the while.

There was a strange light shining in both of his eyes, and he was leaning forward a bit like he was excited. It almost seemed like the innocent reaction of a young child finding some brand new toy, which only made it all the more eerie.

“There you go again, uttering more nonsense! This land of Genos is located in the interior of the continent, far removed from any ocean. Even ignoring any rumors about your bloodline, a visitor from overseas being in a place like this is enough to prove suspicious in and of itself! And then on top of that you say it wasn’t of your own choice, of all things... Just admit that you’ve been hiding some sort of wicked plot already, you little brat!” Ciluel just kept on shouting.

I couldn’t help but be reminded of how Diga and Doddo were before the Suun fell.

When people who couldn’t control their emotions got a hold of serious authority, they tended to get really inflated egos. He had the aura of a petty underling about him, except this petty underling was a more dangerous and troublesome opponent than Diga and Doddo had ever been.

“I don’t have any wicked plots or anything of the sort. Before I realized it, I found myself collapsed in the middle of the forest of Morga... and then I was taken in by the Fa clan head Ai Fa. It didn’t seem like I’d ever be able to find a way back to my old home, so I made up my mind to live as a person of the forest’s edge,” I replied as firmly as I could manage while trying not to agitate Ciluel further. “Is that some sort of crime? I was born overseas, but I want to live as a person of the forest’s edge. And if you say they’re children of the western god Selva, then I’ll gladly be reborn as one too.”

“You would discard your own god and become a child of Selva...?”

“Yes. I came here today with that much resolve.”

Cyclaeus fell back and leaned up against the back of his chair, his gaze shifting

toward that old man, Zylus.

“What do you think, Sir Zylus...? Is it possible for a visitor from overseas to become a child of Selva...?”

“Hmm... There aren’t any past precedents of such matters, so it would require the opinions of the high priest and various religious officials,” the man emotionlessly replied.

Unlike Melfried, he seemed more like he was forcefully suppressing his emotions. He had to be feeling rather nervous, being faced with people of the forest’s edge, who normally had nothing whatsoever to do with folks from the castle town.

“In that case, I suppose we will simply have to wait until we can hear what they have to say on the matter... However, you are still suspected of something quite serious, Asuta of the Fa clan.”

“I’m suspected of something?”

“Indeed... It is believed that you may well have plotted together with that scoundrel Kamyua Yoshu in order to destroy the relationship between Genos and the people of the forest’s edge.”

“That’s ridiculous...” Ai Fa quietly muttered. There was a blazing inferno in her blue eyes, and it was clear she couldn’t hold it back any longer. “Count Turan, I have lived together with Asuta for these past several months. I know better than anyone that he holds no such wicked designs. I cannot take your words as anything but an insult to myself as well.”

“Is that so...? No matter how much time you may spend together, though, I don’t believe that you can truly know every last bit of another person’s heart and mind...”

“Asuta isn’t just some other person. He is a member of my house.” Though Ai Fa’s eyes kept blazing brightly, her voice remained quiet and calm. “Asuta will never betray me. If I did not believe that, I couldn’t have accepted a foreigner such as him... I ask that you take back your previous remark.”

“Allow me to say something too,” Gazraan Rutim calmly chimed in. “When Asuta came and consulted with us about the idea of doing business in the post

town, the Ruu clan head Donda Ruu also expressed concern regarding the matter. And so, he added a condition. If Asuta were working with Kamyua Yoshu on some sort of suspicious plot, the Fa clan chef would offer up his right arm. As you can see, Asuta is still in possession of both arms, which serves as proof that he has earned Donda Ruu's trust."

"Hmm, his trust, is it...?"

"There are many at the forest's edge who oppose Asuta's business. But not a one of them suspects Asuta of conspiring with anyone from town. Your previous statement was an insult not just to Ai Fa and Asuta, but every last person of the forest's edge."

"I see... But unfortunately, I cannot find any basis for us to trust this man Asuta, young hunter of the forest's edge," Cyclopeus calmly stated. "Asuta of the Fa clan, I hear tell that you were first seen in the Genos post town on the fourteenth day of the green month... Is that correct?"

"Huh? I can't say I remember the exact day, but it should have been around two months back."

"There was a record left in the post town's guard station. You and the Fa clan head caused a commotion along with the second son of the Suun there, only to be saved by Kamyua Yoshu, correct?"

Doddo's shoulders trembled.

"Then less than half a month later you opened a stall in the post town and brought wealth to the Fa and Ruu clans... And a further half month after that, the Suun's crimes were brought to light and they were stripped of the right to rule. Was it merely a coincidence that all of those unusual circumstances kept occurring?"

"A coincidence...? I think it would be more accurate to say it was a necessary follow-up. It's true that Kamyua Yoshu was the one who suggested I start doing business in the post town, but that's all. You should already know this, but he formed a plan along with Melfried to expose the Suun's past crimes, and he wanted me to open a stall so that the bonds between the people of the forest's edge and the post town wouldn't break down completely."

Cyclaeus broke out in an even eerier grin. It really was creepy enough that I could understand how Gazraan Rutim had compared it to the sort of expression you'd expect from a mundt.

"Kamyua Yoshu manipulated Lord Melfried, while you did the same with the people of the forest's edge, all to bring about the downfall of the Suun clan... Is that not why you posed as a person of the forest's edge to begin with...?"

"What do you mean, 'posed as'?" Ai Fa questioned, her eyes burning even brighter.

"I cannot believe the look in this woman's eyes!" Ciluel shouted.

And yet, Cyclaeus's smile didn't vanish in the least.

"Thinking as such simply makes more sense to me... Both Asuta of the Fa clan and Kamyua Yoshu appeared together in the post town, and less than half a month later, the Suun clan had fallen. And if both of them were involved, is it not unnatural to simply write that off as mere coincidence...?"

I furrowed my brow. "And you're saying that was all a plot to cause trouble between Genos and the forest's edge? But what would we even have to gain from something like that?"

"You are a visitor from overseas, while the blood of Mahyudra runs through Kamyua Yoshu's veins... What greater reason could you have than to cause calamitous harm to the western kingdom?" Cyclaeus's voice had become so viscous and foul, it almost seemed like it had taken on physical form. "And besides, I also use a great many people of Mahyudra as slaves throughout the Turan lands. So I could see how I could earn resentment from those with roots in that vile nation..."

"But as we just discussed, I'm not a man of the dragon god, and I've got no ties to Mahyudra whatsoever. I have no reason to cause trouble for the western kingdom."

"Visitors from overseas are almost always people of the dragon god. It is certainly hard to imagine so with your appearance, but that alone isn't enough to determine you are not one of their people."

It really was a complete curveball for me, finding out that visitors from

overseas had ties to Mahyudra.

Still, even when I had opened up and told them I wasn't born on this continent, I hadn't really faced any particular discrimination from the people of Genos. So it was probably nothing more than a single bit of folklore that people from overseas had blood ties with Mahyudra, and Cyclaeus's words were just false accusations.

But how exactly could I refute what he was saying? Since I had gone and decided to fight alongside a reckless guy like Kamyua Yoshu, I figured it would be exceptionally difficult to prove my innocence.

"I hear tell that you are quite skilled as a chef... That allowed your business in the post town to succeed, which you used to bring great wealth to the Fa and Ruu clans and earn their trust. Isn't that so, Asuta of the Fa clan...?"

"You're wrong. I just wanted to bring greater prosperity to the settlement at the forest's edge. I know it may be presumptuous of a foreigner like me to feel that way, but I talked to Ai Fa and Gazraan Rutim and everyone about it, and then finally made up my mind to go forward."

Everything I was saying was how I truly felt.

And yet, that didn't seem to have moved Cyclaeus or Ciluel in the slightest.

Still, that was perfectly natural. After all, they certainly never cared about the truth. Or rather, they weren't likely to accept anything as true unless it benefited them in some way.

I couldn't help but feel empty at the thought of how fruitless it must be to try to speak the truth to people who never wanted to understand one another from the start, but then I forced that down with all my might.

And as I searched for what to say next, someone else spoke up. "Sir Cyclaeus, exactly what purpose does gossiping about such matters serve?" It was Melfried, who had been silent all this time. "Even if you were to assume Asuta of the Fa clan here was Kamyua Yoshu's compatriot, it would still have nothing to do with me, regardless of where their objective may lie. And whatever the case, it does not change the fact that the Suun clan committed criminal acts, nor the suspicion cast upon Sir Ciluel and yourself in turn."

“There is a great meaning to all this... Or so I believe,” Cycлаeus stated, holding up a hand to stop Ciluel before he could shout something else. “It’s certainly true that the Suun clan committed crimes... However, the only matters clearly proven are that Zattsu and Tei Suun attacked your group when you acted as a merchant caravan, and I suppose that assault on the actual merchant caravan ten years prior, correct?”

“Hold on. There’s also the matter of the Suun clan pillaging Morga’s blessings. That is why Zuuro Suun is currently awaiting judgment,” Dari Sauti swiftly interjected.

Cyclaeus turned to face the leading clan head, and once more grinned.

“It is not as if we actually witnessed the members of the Suun clan committing that crime... It is simply that we had no choice but to trust your claim that they did so.”

“Are you trying to say that we made up some false accusation in order to bring down the Suun clan?” Dari Sauti questioned, his voice trembling with rage.

Normally he was a gentle, peaceful man, but it seemed that when faced with townsfolk, he could get more than a little hotblooded. But he was still very much the intellectual type compared to other men of the forest’s edge, so he was tasked with leading the discussion alongside Gazraan Rutim.

“It’s certainly difficult to imagine that every last one of you has been lying... However, we cannot disregard the possibility of you noble people of the forest’s edge having been deceived by townsfolk.”

“Yes, and the one who deceived the members of the Suun was—”

“Were you not fooled by Asuta of the Fa clan and Kamyua Yoshu, leading clan heads of the forest’s edge?” Cycлаeus asked, cutting Dari Sauti off. “It’s true that the Suun clan’s members may well have pillaged the forest of Morga... But who is it who revealed those crimes? Did you not inform me that it occurred at the advice of Asuta of the Fa clan on the day of the clan head meeting?”

“That’s right. Since Asuta was manning the stove, he was able to realize that fact before anyone else. There’s nothing strange about that.”

“And thanks to that, you all felt grateful to Asuta of the Fa clan, correct? After all, the Suun had continuously broken the laws of the forest for ten whole years...”

“What would it matter if we did?” Dari Sauti retorted, steadily losing his cool.

In response, Cyclaeus shot him a truly irritating smile.

“Was that not Asuta of the Fa clan’s strategy all along...? By exposing the Suun clan’s crimes, he and Kamyua Yoshu earned the trust of Lord Melfried and the people of the forest’s edge. And now they are plotting to thrust false crimes upon the Suun clan and ourselves, bringing further chaos to our land of Genos.”

“I see. So your assertion is that the Suun clan’s only crimes were pillaging the blessings of Morga and assaulting the merchant caravan, while everything else is false accusations invented by Kamyua Yoshu,” Gazraan Rutim replied in a perfectly calm tone. “The attack on the envoys from the town of Banarm, the murder of the militia’s leader, and the claim that you tried to pin all of those crimes on the bandit group known as the Red Beards... You say those are all groundless, made-up claims, Cyclaeus?”

“That is exactly the case, young hunter of the forest’s edge. By mixing in truth with his statements, Kamyua Yoshu plotted to lend his false claims credibility... What a truly unscrupulous method.” At that Cyclaeus crossed both arms in front of his emaciated stomach, then continued on in a truly pompous tone. “That man has mixed blood of Mahyudra and Selva... He could simply live in Sym or Jagar where no one would find issue with his background, but instead he specifically chose to live an ill-fated half-a-life here in Selva, and grew to hate our great nation... I cannot help but sympathize with you, Lord Melfried, and you people of the forest’s edge, getting caught up in such a man’s wicked ambitions.”

“So you insist on looking down on us as fools who cannot even tell right from wrong to the bitter end, do you, Cyclaeus...?” Gulaf Zaza grumbled, apparently unable to hold back any longer. “We never at any point thought of an outsider like Kamyua Yoshu as an ally. But we sensed truth in his words, and came here to talk to you in order to determine the facts of the matter, Cyclaeus.”

“And...? Do you truly believe it just and valid to believe only Kamyua Yoshu’s

words as truth while doubting everything I say as a falsehood...?" Cyclaeus retorted, his gaze now turning to Zuuro Suun. "Zuuro Suun, O former leading clan head of the forest's edge..."

Zuuro Suun's hollow eyes looked up at Cyclaeus.

"It has been over twenty years now since I began mediating matters with the leading clan head of the forest's edge. The first ten years were with Zattsu Suun, and for the following ten I formed a bond with you... As such, there are truths which only I am able to see."

Zuuro Suun offered no response.

"Zattsu Suun was a man akin to ambition personified. And I had always feared his ambitious fangs might one day be bared at Genos... However, I never sensed your father's wicked ambition from you, even once."

Still nothing.

"It is certainly true that you may well have led the Suun down a poor path... However, that was simply the path laid out for you by Zattsu Suun, was it not? And so, I cannot help but find the idea of treating you alone as a criminal pitiable..."

"What do you mean, 'pitiable'?" Gulaf Zaza interjected, his voice dripping with irritation. "We discussed this matter back at the forest's edge too. But the crime for abandoning giba hunting and pillaging the fruits of the forest for ten whole years is a heavy one... And on top of that, many in the Suun settlement had their souls rotted away with despair."

"Oh... And it is the judgment of the people of the forest's edge that Zuuro Suun alone must bear responsibility for those crimes...?"

"Zuuro Suun was both the leading clan head and the head of the Suun. Since Zattsu Suun had already retired from the position, there is no one else who can answer for the crimes committed during those ten years," Gulaf Zaza answered, his eyes now a fiery blaze.

As his people previously fell under the man, the Zaza clan head had the deepest ties with Zuuro Suun.

The Zaza and Suun had exchanged ties of blood for a long, long time. I couldn't even fathom how Gulaf Zaza must have been feeling at the moment, having to denounce the former head of his parent clan.

And yet Cyclaeus just kept on sneering, caring nothing about such matters.

"Hmm... As you say, no matter how pitiable it may be, we have no choice but to have Zuuro Suun answer for these crimes. However... If you leading clan heads were deceived by an outsider, it would be a different matter entirely, would it not...?"

"So you're going to keep on insisting Asuta of the Fa clan and Kamyua Yoshu tricked us?"

"Indeed... If you are not satisfied, then shall we hear the impartial opinion of Genos's legal officer, Sir Zylus?" Cyclaeus asked, his eyes once again turning toward the old man in question.

And sitting there beside Melfried, Zylus shot him back an annoyed scowl.

"Sir Zylus... Is it necessary that Zuuro Suun face an impartial trial for misleading his people?"

"Yes, well... A man in the position of leading clan head and head of his own clan coercing others to break the law is a serious crime indeed."

"Then is it also necessary to judge the man's family...? From what I am told, the punishment for that family in question sitting here was having the Suun name taken from them and becoming members of other clans..."

"I cannot say that is in agreement with the laws of Genos," Zylus stated, restraining his emotions. "I hear tell that it is the clan heads who lead their people at the forest's edge. As such, even family would not be able to oppose them. If the crimes of the branch houses are to be wiped clean, then would those six not also be innocent of any crimes?"

"We have not said the crimes of the members of the branch houses have gone unquestioned. They have instead been given a path to atonement, by living properly as people of the forest's edge," Gazraan Rutim calmly interjected. "The same is also true for these six former members of the main Suun house. To some extent or another, they have all received Zattsu Suun's

wicked influence. And so we also judged them discarding the Suun name as important for the sake of freeing them from that curse as well.”

“Hmm... And then you stole the right to lead from the Suun, correct?” Cyclaeus asked with a grin and a suspicious light shining in his eyes. “That is one point I cannot accept... Even more so with the motives of outsiders interfering here and there in the background.”

“Those measures had nothing to do with Asuta. While it’s true that he was crucial in exposing the Suun’s crimes, it was the will of all the clan heads present at the meeting that determined what would happen after.”

“But it changes matters if the downfall of the Suun was part of a greater plot, does it not? In actuality, you were all deceived by Kamyua Yoshu’s sweet talk afterward and went so far as to slander me, after all. How far can we trust you when you were chosen as leading clan heads as the result of such a plot...? I have my doubts on that matter.”

For a while, the room went silent.

The hand Cyclaeus was playing to escape from answering for his crimes was coming more and more into view.

Part of it was unsurprising, yet some of it was completely unexpected too. And as the leading clan heads sat there wondering what point to strike at, their eyes quietly blazing away, there was suddenly a voice.

“So... What exactly do you intend to do if you can’t trust the current three leading clan heads? You couldn’t possibly be planning on reinstating the Suun clan to the post, could you?” Yamiru Lea questioned with a chilling chuckle, finally breaking the silence.



“I have yet to hear your name...” Cyclaeus stated, calmly turning toward Yamiru Lea.

Breaking out in a bewitching smile, she replied, “I am Yamiru Lea, former eldest daughter of the main Suun house. On this side of me are Diga, Doddo, and Mida, while these two are Oura and Tsuvai. Oura is Zuuro Suun’s former wife, while the rest of us are all his children... However, only Tsuvai is Oura’s daughter, while the rest of us all had different mothers.”

“Hmm... You certainly seem appropriately bold for one who has inherited Zattsu Suun’s blood.”

“Should I respond to your words with something like, ‘You have my deepest thanks for your excessive praise,’ I wonder?” Yamiru Lea said in such a provocative tone that it even caused me to feel anxious. “Allow me to simply confirm: is it not the case that you summoned us here because you thought the punishment toward the members of the Suun clan was too lax? We came prepared to be judged by the laws of Genos as criminals.”

As she said that, Yamiru Lea looked over her former family. And the first to return her gaze and respond was shockingly Mida of all people.

“Yeah... I did lots of bad stuff, so I’ve gotta a-atone...? Atone for that. That’s what everyone from the Ruu told me...”

It was hard to tell just how much of the conversation he had understood, and his words were awkward like a child’s, but they were so filled with earnest emotion that it was enough to bring you to tears.

“I wanna live with the Ruu clan as a man of the forest’s edge... So I won’t cry, no matter how you punish me...”

A silence fell over the room.

And then in the midst of that, Ciluel quietly grumbled, “Damn monster...” but his voice seemed to carry unusually well.

For a moment I felt like I was about to burst a blood vessel with pure rage, but

a swift hand from beside me grabbing my wrist managed to keep me from losing control. When I turned to look, I found Ai Fa's eyes were blazing just as brightly as before as she came in close to my ear.

"Do not lose your composure. All of us here feel the same as you."

"Sorry..." I nodded back, then calmed my wild breathing.

Not long after, Yamiru Lea's chilly laughter once again filled the room.

"As you can see, even Mida, mentally the youngest of us all, has gathered up an unyielding resolve. And yet now, you've changed over to saying the punishment handed down by the leading clan heads is unjustly heavy?"

"At the previous meeting, I had not yet seen through Kamyua Yoshu and this Asuta man's machinations... Still, it does not change the fact that your crimes must be judged anew."

"I see... But regardless of what you may be thinking, it simply isn't possible to reinstate the Suun as the leading clan at this point, Count Turan."

"Oh...? And why is that, exactly...?"

"It should be obvious with just a little thought, wouldn't you say? After our long years of continuously betraying them, not a single person of the forest's edge would accept the Suun leading them again," Yamiru Lea coolly stated.

"Our people cannot accept betrayal and corruption. If you attempt to reinstate the Suun as the leading clan, they would rise up in revolt. It's possible that everyone but the Suun may even abandon the forest of Morga entirely... So tell me, count, is that the sort of conclusion you desire?"

"But you people of the forest's edge respect the law highly, do you not...? If the members of the Suun aside from Zuuro Suun are judged innocent of these crimes, that concern should not apply, correct?"

"Not so. The Suun clan hasn't properly hunted giba for ten years now. Though the members of the branch houses are in the midst of being taught how to do so, as you can see, this is the present state of the former main house," Yamiru Lea proclaimed, pointing toward Diga and Doddo with her elegant finger.

"There's simply no way a man lacking the strength to even hunt a giba could possibly lead the people of the forest's edge. And so in every way imaginable,

the Suun are unfit to serve as the leading clan.”

Yamiru Lea once said that depending on circumstances she would be willing to take the seat of leading clan head and place herself in Cyclaeus’s pocket, only for Granny Jiba and Gulaf Zaza to reject the idea. But now, she was taking this tack to counter Cyclaeus’s argument.

The unexpected sudden ambush left even Cyclaeus contemplating matters for a bit.

But before long, as if he had been waiting for that moment, his younger brother shouted out, “Woman, you seem to be pleased with yourself, thinking you really laid it all out perfectly, but that just goes to show how shallow the thinking of you barbarians really is! Such drivel is pointless before our solemn laws!”

Yamiru Lea shot Ciluel a chilly sidelong glance.

The man gave a devilish laugh, the bangs of his mushroom-like hair swaying all the while.

“Qualifications don’t come from someone’s ability! They come from their bloodline and position! As long as someone has the right blood flowing through their veins, it doesn’t matter how incompetent or wicked they may be!”

“So even if they’re incompetent or abuse their power, it doesn’t matter so long as they’re not a criminal?”

“That’s right! And none have been tormented more by that harsh truth than my older brother and myself!”

For some reason, Cyclaeus wiped the expression from his face and closed his eyes. There was a strange feel hanging in the air.

“Lord Melfried and Sir Zylus, you both understand what I am saying, don’t you? Our father and older brother were utterly useless fools! They may not have been wicked, but they were thoroughly ordinary incompetents incapable of shouldering the Turan name! But until their souls were sent to Selva, we had to keep on living in their shadows!”

So there was yet another older brother above Cyclaeus, the current head of

the house?

At any rate, there was some unidentifiable emotion like an inferno whirling about in Ciluel's eyes as he sat there, his face bright red.

"And yet, we had no choice but to endure those hardships until Selva indicated the proper path forward! Then, at the end of that travail awaited the prosperity Turan now enjoys! Since you people of the forest's edge live here in Genos, you must obey its laws! Even if your leading clan head is incompetent and foolish, your one and only option is to live alongside and support them!"

"I do not know what sort of life you were forced to live... But does reinstating the Suun clan truly align so perfectly with the laws of Genos?" Yamiru Lea replied, having calmly stared at Ciluel as he suddenly tossed his dignity out the window. "It was our people who determined several decades ago that the Suun would be the leading clan. And now, with the approval of all of the clan heads, the Ruu, Zaza, and Sauti have taken up that responsibility. Neither of those matters should have anything to do with the laws of Genos."

"If that was a matter solely relating to the people of the forest's edge, it is true that we might have no room to interfere... But what if a plot by those meaning to cause friction here in Genos was involved?" Cyclaeus asked, suddenly reviving.

It was impossible to say what was going on with how he had turned so eerily silent and expressionless, but now he was once again staring back at Yamiru Lea with a viscous smile.

"I cannot help but believe it incredibly dangerous to continue to accept the three leading clan heads put in place as a result of a plot formed by Kamyua Yoshu and this visitor from overseas, Asuta... Will those three clans not bring even greater chaos and disaster to both Genos and the forest's edge than the Suun ever did?"

"So you've decided the eldest son of the main Suun house should be the next leading clan head?" Donda Ruu chimed in, speaking up for the first time.

His expression looked far calmer than Gulaf Zaza and Dari Sauti, who both had rage burning brightly in their eyes.

“If you value bloodline above all else, then Diga there would be the one most qualified to lead.”

Diga turned to face Donda Ruu, looking utterly aghast. His stubble-coated face was now twisted with what could be described as pure terror.

“So you are the eldest son, Diga Suun...?” Cyclaeus asked, his sickening gaze turning that way. “Your father was the former leading clan head as well as the head of your clan, but he must be judged for his crimes... Do you not have a responsibility to properly lead your people as his heir?”

“I-I...” Diga started, his voice trembling with fear.

It was like watching a frog being glared at by a snake.

“You are still young... And so, I believe it would be for the best if you put your life on the line and strove to rectify the mistakes of your father and grandfather... What do you say...?”

Diga gulped so loud it was clearly audible.

But then... for some reason, he stole a glance at me and Ai Fa, and said, “I-I... I had the Suun name taken from me a month back now... I-I’m not qualified to be called an heir anymore.”

“Oh...? But if it is judged that punishment was improper, then just as before, you can—”

“I-I surrendered to my fear of the criminal Zattsu Suun and fled the Dom settlement! And then after that, I ran away from Zattsu Suun too! There’s no way someone like me would ever be qualified to call myself a member of the Suun clan!” Diga suddenly shouted.

His eyes that had sunken into his gaunt face started to faintly tear up.

“Tei Suun ran from the Dom settlement along with us! But he stayed by Zattsu Suun’s side and took back the Suun name... And then he died as a criminal! Doddo and I just abandoned him, so we’re not good enough to call ourselves Suun! As if we ever could! If you want to give me the Suun name back anyway, th-then just scalp me right next to my father!”

“If Diga’s executed, then I’d be next in line as the second son...” Doddo

mumbled in a gloomy voice. “But I feel the same as him... So I guess that brings things to Mida.”

At that, Mida stared blankly down at his former big brother.

And from beside them, Yamiru Lea broke out in a graceful smile.

“Mida is still only fourteen, so it will be a year until he’s qualified to be clan head. Up until that time, I would need to hold onto that post for him as eldest daughter... Of course, I also have no interest in taking over as the head of the wicked Suun clan.”

“When there are no children over the age of fifteen, the custom is for the clan head’s wife to take charge...” Oura quietly chimed in while tightly grasping Tsuvai’s hand. “But I have no intention of serving in that role either. So please, execute me as a criminal along with the others.”

Every last one of them had renounced the post of Suun clan head.

And as she sat there before the silenced Cyclopeus, Yamiru Lea’s lips twisted into a grin.

“It seems that none of the members of the main house are up to the task. In cases such as that, next we look to branch houses with strong ties of blood. However, Zuuro Suun’s siblings all died without leaving behind children, and so it turns to looking at branch houses with weaker blood ties.”

Cyclopeus had no response.

“But can someone with such fleeting ties of blood truly serve as leading clan head? To start with, I can’t imagine those men and women who were bound by their fear of Zattsu Suun alone would have the backbone needed for the task.” At that, Yamiru Lea shot Gulaf Zaza a suspicious sidelong glance. “If a member of the branch houses were to become clan head, everyone would want them to be folded into one of their former subordinate clans. In order to recover severed blood ties, the largest of the clans formerly under the Suun would be chosen, so the post of leading clan head would ultimately go to Gulaf Zaza.”

The wicked noble remained silent.

“That is the only path forward if you wish to respect the Suun bloodline when

choosing the leading clan head. Are you satisfied now, Count Turan?"

"That's ridiculous! There's no way it's all right for everyone but me and Mida to get executed!" Tsvai wailed, shooting to her feet.

"No standing without permission!" Ciluel shouted.

But Tsvai just shot back, "Shut up! I've been sitting here silently listening, but everyone just keeps spouting selfish drivel! Besides, there's no way we'd ever become underlings to some noble like that!"

"You brat! You dare make light of the noble bloodlines of Genos?!" Ciluel raged, reaching for his hip without thinking. Naturally, though, there wasn't a sword there.

As she met his glare head on, Tsvai snorted. "Hmph! If you all claim to be the rulers of us people of the forest's edge, then you should show some responsibility too! You just let Zattsu Suun do as he pleased, so how can you just sit there acting all arrogant?!"

"You little...!"

"Our people of the forest's edge decided every last one of us would atone for Zattsu Suun's crimes! The Suun clan is making up for it by living properly from here on out, and everyone else is guiding us down the right path! That's why the Ruu and Rutim and Dom took in troublemakers like us!"

Though Tsvai was the littlest one present, she was standing in front of her precious mother to protect her as she glared at Ciluel. And right now, her big eyes were blazing even brighter with rage than they had last night. "Still, Zattsu Suun and his group committed crimes outside the forest's edge too! And if you knew and just turned a blind eye, then you're guilty too! So how can you go blaming the people of the forest's edge?!"

"That's nothing more than slander fabricated by that scoundrel Kamyua Yoshu! We knew nothing of any crimes committed by members of the Suun clan!"

"You must be blind, then! And the Ruu and Rutim must be more capable than you, since they noticed first!" Tsvai retorted, and then her big eyes half closed. "And besides, Diga and Doddosaid before that you folks from the castle town

let the Suun clan's crimes slide. So when Doddo or Mida caused a commotion in town, you all smoothed it over, didn't you?"

"Yes, you dodged that question at the last meeting, but can you provide a satisfactory answer to it today?" Gazraan Rutim calmly interjected, gently reaching out with his long arm and sitting Tsuvai back down. "You're insisting that you had no knowledge of Zattsu Suun's wrongdoing. On the other hand, you have unjustly covered for Doddo and Mida's crimes. Exactly what reasons did you have for doing that?"

Even now, the noble brothers remained silent.

"I am asking you, Ciluel, leader of the militia. It was the town guards who protected the Suun clan, and they fall under your command, do they not?"

"Hmph! You think I know anything about the failings of the guards in the post town?! My job is to command the whole of the militia!"

"So you are saying it isn't your role to command the town guards?" Gazraan Rutim calmly pressed, only for Ciluel to reply with an extremely repulsive faint smile.

"If you've got a complaint, then lodge it with the head guard. It's got nothing to do with me!"

"So it was done at that head guard's sole discretion? I've heard tell that whenever Mida destroyed a stall, soldiers came from the castle town to pay for the damages and settle things, though."

"Don't ask me! If there really is someone who'd do that in my militia, then start by proving it!"

"I cannot say your demeanor shows much willingness to understand and sympathize with our position. How truly disappointing," Gazraan Rutim said while maintaining that same calm tone as always. "The truth is, Asuta is a pure-blooded person of the forest's edge, born in our settlement... Could you believe such a statement?"

"What? What are you trying to pull now?"

"Every now and again, someone with an appearance like Asuta's is born in the

settlement at the forest's edge. Asuta was simply joking when he said he was a visitor from overseas, so I ask that you discard any suspicion of him conspiring with Kamyua Yoshu here and now."

"That's ridiculous! Do you really think an excuse like that will work at this—"

"Well then, is there any proof that Asuta is a visitor from overseas? Asuta just happened to be born at the forest's edge with the appearance of a foreigner, and visited the post town for the first time at the age of seventeen. That's all there is to it. There's no way someone like him would conspire with someone from town to bring harm to Genos and the forest's edge, wouldn't you say?" After saying all that in a dead serious tone, Gazraan Rutim broke out in a smile. "That is the sort of thing that you are saying. If you cannot trust me, then I also cannot trust you."

Though Ciluel looked furious, he held his tongue.

Taking that as his cue, Leito grinned and started pouring salt on that wound. "Well then, I suppose it's our turn. After all, focusing on topics with actual proof seems beneficial to us all."

"You are Kamyua Yoshu's attendant, are you not, child...?" Cyclaeus asked, shooting Leito a crafty look. "And I have also heard tell that you are the orphaned child of the leader of that merchant caravan that was attacked ten years ago. I most certainly sympathize with your circumstances, but I cannot imagine anything useful can be gained from having a child like yourself act as a witness at this point..."

"Yes, there isn't any value to my testimony. Instead, as Kamyua Yoshu's proxy I have brought Barthia here as a witness."

Cyclaeus's eyes narrowed suspiciously, but Leito just smiled even brighter.

"Did you think that Kamyua planned to have me act as a witness out of desperation when he realized he wouldn't make it? That's certainly quite a misunderstanding. In fact, the reason Kamyua left Genos in the first place was to search for Barthia here."

All the while, Barthia was silently burning holes in Ciluel with her glare.

After glancing her way out of the corner of his eye, Leito continued on,

“Bartha was the wife of the late leader of the Red Beards, Goram. Have I said enough for you to understand the value of her testimony?”

“Wife...? Wait, are you saying that person is a woman...?” Cyclaeus asked.

“Geez, everyone’s so rude about that. Well, I’m used to getting treated like a man by this point,” Bartha said with a brazen grin.

And then, she reached up and roughly pulled off the leather strap holding back her hair, letting her surprisingly long blackish-brown locks tumble down over her face.

“Well? Do I look at least a bit womanly now? Not that I’m ever gonna look sensual with a face like this, though.”

In all likelihood, everyone had noticed the unusual change that had occurred. Ciluel had just been beet red with rage, but now he was frozen stiff like a statue and completely pale.

“Over these past ten years and some change, I’ve been retraining my weakened body. I was pretty skinny back then, so did you not recognize me? I knew who you were at first sight, though.”

“Wh-What are you saying...?”

“Don’t play dumb. You were the one who asked my husband Goram to attack those envoys from Banarm, weren’t you, Ciluel?” Bartha said, the rage simmering in her eyes. “If I’m wrong, why not lift up that amusing hair of yours a bit? Goram was so furious that he gave you a nice, deep cut on your forehead, and I can’t imagine a scar like that would vanish after just ten years.”

Ciluel was pressed tight up against the back of his chair, and he had started trembling like he had the shakes. He probably didn’t even realize it, but his hand had reached up to cover his hearty bangs and forehead.

“Even I never thought a noble would personally hire bandits, but it looks like Kamyua’s guess hit the mark,” Leito chimed in with the same smile as before. “Well, before taking on the role of militia leader, you had plenty of time on your hands, didn’t you? And Kamyua also said Lord Cyclaeus would never trust anyone but a relative to help with such a criminal plot.”

“I see... So this is yet another of that fool’s ploys, is it...?” Cyclaeus responded with a gloomy chuckle. “Did he learn of the old scar on Ciluel’s head and then come up with it...? Woman, if you value your life, I suggest that you wash your hands of this trickery...”

“Hmph, you don’t need to worry about that. You can’t go picking a fight with nobles if you aren’t willing to put your life on the line, after all.”

“Oh...? Do you truly understand...? After all, if you are the Red Beard leader’s wife, that means you were a member of those bandits until you had his child...”

“I’m well aware of what that means.”

“Hmph... So you say you came here prepared to be judged as a remnant of that bandit group...?” Cyclaeus asked, a downright venomous shine in his eyes. “Ten years may have passed, but those crimes haven’t been forgiven... If you insist that you are Goram Redbeard’s wife, then regardless of anything Ciluel may or may not have done, you will be punished as a criminal...”

“This is getting repetitive. What did you think I meant when I said I was putting my life on the line, eh?” Barthia asked with a daring grin, brushing off Cyclaeus’s glare. “I’m the last survivor of the Red Beards, Goram Redbeard’s wife Barthia. You can go ahead and hang me or whatever you need to do. I was ready for that when I set foot in the castle town, after all.”

I unwittingly gulped. And then, I remembered how Barthia was yesterday. She said she wanted to see her son Jeeda one last time... Thinking back on her words, I was impressed again by how much resolve was behind them.

And from beside me, Ai Fa was also staring intensely at Barthia.

“I swear on my life and the name of the western god Selva that I am the wife of Goram Redbeard, and that the man seated there is the fiend who tried to get my husband wrapped up in this wicked plot. He tried to instigate Goram by telling him a group of envoys from Banarm would be coming soon, as well as the date they’d arrive on, the route they’d be taking, and how they’d be guarded. And he said to kill them all and loot their treasure.”

“S-Silence! I have the noble Turan blood running through my veins, so the idea of me visiting some bandit group is—”

“But being part of a count’s house in Genos is pretty insignificant as far as nobles go, right? Kamyua Yoshu said the only ones with a significant position and fortune are the heads of house and their heirs,” Barthra calmly yet fiercely responded, cutting off a bewildered Ciluel. “That’s why you became your house head’s yes-man and errand boy, isn’t it? Well, whatever. All I can do is testify that you’re the one who visited my husband and tried to incite him to commit that crime. I leave the rest to everyone else.”

Once again, silence descended over the room.

And the one to break it this time around was Melfried.

“Sir Ciluel, it was in the same period in which those envoys from Banarm were attacked that you were assigned the task of leading the militia. And from what I am told, that was an unprecedented promotion, brought about by the emphatic demands of Count Cyclaeus.”

Ciluel sat there silently.

“And once you acquired that post, you declared the Red Beards were the ones who had attacked the envoy group and the previous militia leader, and mobilized a group to subdue them. However, from what I am told, the only reason it was determined that the Red Beards were responsible was because they were the only bandit group with sufficient forces to do such a thing at the time.”

Even still, Ciluel didn’t say a word.

“But the ambush in the forest of Morga was also said to be the work of the Red Beards, while we now know it was committed by Zattsu Suun. Is it not true that when you failed to bring the Red Beards under your command, you decided instead to pin false crimes upon them in order to seal their lips?”

“Ridiculous! The Red Beards were a vicious band of thieves! It is an undeniable fact that they perpetrated countless crimes over the course of many years!”

“That’s true, of course. Even if the group didn’t kill, it doesn’t change the weight of their other crimes. As such, there was no option but to have everyone who had committed those numerous robberies pay with their lives.”

Did that mean...Bartha was going to receive a death sentence too?

As I just sat there worrying, I heard Ai Fa grinding her teeth next to me.

“Even so, the blade of justice must be swung in a correct and proper manner. Even if someone is already a criminal, that doesn’t make it acceptable to place false charges upon them.”

“Hold on, Lord Melfried... This is all a plot by that scoundrel, Kamyua Yoshu. That despicable man set about laying all sorts of traps in a scheme to bring down Ciluel and myself,” Cyclaeus stated, once more holding out a hand to restrain his brother, who was currently alternating between going pale and red with rage. Though he had the look of a cornered beast in his eyes, his twisted grin still clung to his face. “That woman may indeed be the survivor of that bandit group... But even if that is so, that doesn’t mean that everything she says is true, now does it...?”

“Are you claiming that she is telling lies? What reason could there be for going so far as risking your life to submit false testimony?”

“Oh, there is a reason for such things... For example, what if Kamyua Yoshu held someone more precious to her than life itself in his grasp?”

“Hah! Are you talking about my boy Jeeda, perhaps? No matter how skilled of a bodyguard Kamyua Yoshu may be, he won’t be catching that wild brat of mine easily,” Bartha replied with a sneer.

And as his gaze remained fixed on Melfried, Cyclaeus’s lips twisted into a grin.

“I wonder about that... Half a month ago, a red-haired bandit child attacked people of the forest’s edge in town, including Asuta there. If that boy was the child of the late bandit leader, that would mean he had contact with Asuta, who in turn has ties to Kamyua Yoshu. Is that all simply a coincidence...?”

“It is. It’s been a year now since Jeeda and I went our separate ways. I’m following my own will, and the same is true of that son of mine,” Bartha replied, but Cyclaeus unsurprisingly ignored her.

“There has also been further suspicion cast upon Kamyua Yoshu... Lord Melfried, you have heard tell of the bandits dressed as people of the forest’s edge who attacked the Daleim plantations, have you not...? I believe that

incident was also part of that accursed Kamyua Yoshu's plot."

Melfried just sat there listening to his words, expressionless. I really couldn't sense any emotion at all in his chilly gray eyes.

"That man took several hunters of the forest's edge along with him and left Genos... And not long after, that suspicious group of bandits appeared... Was it not Kamyua Yoshu's plan to frame the hunters with him as the culprits and have the militia cast judgment upon them?"

"And you're saying this is yet another piece of that supposed plot to form a rift between Genos and the people of the forest's edge?"

"Of course... Naturally, though, Ciluel was not foolish enough to fall for such an obvious ploy. Currently, he has a unit patrolling outside of Genos in order to capture the criminals who have committed these deeds under Kamyua Yoshu's guidance. I'm certain Kamyua Yoshu and his accomplices shall be brought in by the militia in short order..."

So that whole commotion was meant to take down Kamyua Yoshu rather than the people of the forest's edge... Cyclaeus must have been plotting to seal that aloof bodyguard's lips first.

In that case, maybe it's a good thing that Kamyua didn't make it back... Or is it the opposite, and we can't settle anything without him around? I pondered, only for a voice to sound out from behind us.

"Count Turan, guests have arrived!" Jimon shouted out from the other side of the heavy door.

Cyclaeus's face froze, with his eerie grin still firmly in place.

"Guests...? But all the participants in today's meeting are already gathered..."

"That's not true. I'm nothing but a proxy, after all," Leito cheerfully chimed in.

With that, everyone realized just who had arrived.

A moment later, the door swung open, and just the person we had expected came into view.

"I'm seriously late, huh? I'm just glad I managed to make it before everyone left," a voice said with an aloof chuckle.

This was my first time in half a month seeing Kamyua Yoshu, as he wandered into the room.



5

“Impossible!” Ciluel shouted. “Why are you here...? What were my men doing?!”

“Oh, the members of the militia carried out their duty just fine. It was a real shock, seeing such a huge unit deployed along the highway,” Kamyua Yoshu said with a grin, his gaze turning toward Donda Ruu. “Donda Ruu, the three hunters from your clan that I borrowed have safely returned. Since they don’t have passes, they met up with the group of hunters standing by near the gates.”

The Ruu clan head silently nodded.

Having been thoroughly brushed off, Ciluel started stamping his feet again.

“You’re under suspicion of sending bandits to the plantations! It couldn’t be... Did you kill soldiers of the militia?”

“Of course not. We appealed to their hearts and minds and had them open the way to us. You may say I’m under suspicion, but it’s not as if there’s an official warrant out for me, after all.”

Kamyua Yoshu really was just the same as always.

Thanks to the long journey, his clothes looked a bit filthy, but his aloof attitude and grin hadn’t changed a bit. And with one of his long, spindly arms, he gestured toward the still-open door.

“By the way, I brought along one more guest. Melfried, the pass you gave me didn’t go to waste after all.”

The young man who then appeared looked exactly as you’d expect of a noble. He had black hair, unusual for a westerner, and his skin was an ivory white that didn’t seem like it had ever been tanned much by the sun. He had a medium build and a youthful face, but he wore a serious look. As for his attire, since he had on the same sort of long cloak as Kamyua Yoshu, I could only see that he wore some high-quality leather shoes.

Everyone’s piercing gazes were fixated on the man, trying to see if it was someone they recognized.

“This is Lord Welhide of the Banarm ducal house. He is the second son of the duke’s younger sister, placing him sixth in line in terms of succession.”

“Th-The Banarm ducal house?!” Ciluel shouted, his voice cracking.

Though his mouth remained firmly shut, the man’s light brown eyes turned toward the militia leader.

“The leader of the envoys who were attacked ten years ago was Lord Welhide’s father. I believe he also has a right to know the truth, and so I asked him to accompany me,” Kamyua Yoshu nonchalantly replied with a smile.

As he shot the aloof bodyguard a stormy glare, Cycлаeus quietly asked, “Jimon... are these two the only guests...? If so, hurry up and close the door.”

“Yes, lord...” Jimon replied while showing a bit of hesitation. Ultimately, though, he offered no retort to his master and just slowly closed the heavy door.

“I really am sorry for not only showing up later than agreed, but also bringing along more guests than expected. Ah, you don’t need to prepare any more seats. Leito, could you give yours to Lord Welhide?”

“Of course,” Leito replied as he stood, and Welhide silently went ahead and seated himself.

“Kamyua Yoshu... What exactly is your aim here...?” Cycлаeus asked.

“My aim?” Kamyua repeated, tilting his head. “Well, let’s see... I had already planned on inviting Lord Welhide in advance. After all, since you’re just as influential as Duke Genos himself, I figured I needed a witness who wouldn’t be intimidated by that fact. Lord Welhide seemed a suitable candidate due to his ties to the matters in question, and I’ve been trying to convince him to join in even up to yesterday.”

Cycлаeus just sat there silently glaring.

“Melfried prepared me a letter of introduction, but that didn’t change the fact that I was just a traveler with no one else to back me up. It took quite a bit of time to obtain a meeting with the noble ducal house. Then in the meantime those bandits dressed in the attire of the forest’s edge started appearing

around Genos, but since we were in Banarm from the sixth of the white month until the thirteenth, we at least couldn't possibly have been involved in those crimes. And considering I have the looks of someone from Mahyudra and there were three people of the forest's edge along with me, the guy running the inn where we were staying certainly wouldn't fail to remember us."

If I remembered correctly, those bandits were active until the day I was released from Cyclaeus's manor, on the ninth of the white month. It was possible Kamyua Yoshu had openly remained in Banarm in order to secure an alibi.

"It seems like I'm suspected of directing those bandits, but ultimately, there's no proof to that claim. When I explained that I needed to escort Lord Welhide, a noble of Banarm, to Genos, the men in the militia all willingly opened the way to us."

"You... You went so far as to involve the Banarm ducal house in your wicked plot?"

"I'm not the one who mixed them up in all this. That's down to whoever attacked those envoys ten years ago. If it weren't for that tragic incident, Lord Welhide likely would've never even set foot in Genos," Kamyua replied with a shrug of his shoulders.

And then from beside him, Welhide finally spoke up. "I... I came here to learn the truth. I was told that if I came to this place, I would find out the true circumstances behind my father's death... And I intend to apologize directly to Duke Marstein Genos later on for rudely passing through the gates without notice."

Leito and this young man's circumstances really were a lot alike, both having lost a father to those attacks ten years ago. For sure, he didn't come because Kamyua Yoshu asked. It was the culprit behind those murders that drew him here.

"Now then, it looks like we've got all the players gathered together... I really, truly am grateful that you came here today, Bartha."

"I've been hesitating this whole time over whether I would or not, but last night I finally worked up the nerve."

Bartha's ferocious stare met directly with Kamyua Yoshu's mysterious gaze.

By hurrying here as a witness, Bartha set herself to be judged as a criminal... and Kamyua Yoshu must have known that right from the start. For a long moment, his penetrating gaze lingered on her before turning back toward Cyclaeus.

"From what I can see, it looks like the interrogation has more or less come to a close. We've got the first son of Duke Genos, Melfried, Lord Welhide of the Banarm ducal house, and if I'm not mistaken, even the legal officer from the castle. You still haven't admitted to your crimes, even when faced with all these elites, huh?"

"Kamyua Yoshu... Why are you so determined to cause harm to our fair land of Genos...?"

"Cause harm to Genos? Not at all. All I want is a fair trial and for Genos to prosper," Kamyua Yoshu said with a grin as he waved his right arm in a wide arc. When his long cloak trailed behind him, it looked as if a huge bird was spreading out a single wing or something. And then, he placed his left hand over his heart. "My god is the western god Selva. Fifteen years ago, I renounced the northern god Mahyudra. And all I desire is peace for Genos, a part of Selva's territory."

"How insolent... If you perform such a ritual to the gods untruthfully, your soul will be ripped into four..."

"Yup. And is there really reason enough for me to want to bring harm to Selva so badly that I'd sacrifice my very soul? It's true that the western kingdom didn't exactly welcome me with open arms, but that was nothing compared to how I was treated in Mahyudra." With a grin, Kamyua folded his arms again. "Otherwise, why would I need to change gods in the first place? I might have been born in Mahyudra, but my mother and I were persecuted constantly there. So after my mother passed, I had no ties left to that place and changed gods. If I were going to curse any blood in my veins, I'd think of causing trouble for Mahyudra, not Selva."

Cyclaeus quietly glared.

"But fortunately Genos is pretty far removed from Mahyudra, so it's rare for anyone to persecute someone like me. Thanks to that, I can freely wish for

Genos's prosperity without any reservations. Still, are you certain you aren't the ones who cursed the world, Count Cyclaeus?"

Still no response.

"You two didn't wish for Genos's prosperity, or even glory for the Turan house. All you wanted was to boost your own fortunes. Looking back, wasn't that the start of all this tragedy?"

Even as he nonchalantly chuckled, Kamyua Yoshu's eyes had begun taking on that piercing look. It was a mysterious light in his eyes that somehow reminded me of Granny Jiba.

"From what I'm told, you were originally a second son, Count Cyclaeus. And here in Genos, just being part of a count's house isn't all that valuable. I've heard Lord Polarth of the house of Daleim lament that second sons have no choice but to live their lives in the shadows."

Even at that, Cyclaeus remained silent.

"Still, Lord Polarth doesn't seem to have enough ambition in him to push aside his father and older brother in order to grab hold of prosperity for himself. What was the case for you, though? Just what sort of emotions festered in your heart at having been born as a mere second son of a house given just the small Turan territory to rule over?"

"You intend on slandering me even further...?"

"This isn't slander. It's an accusation," Kamyua Yoshu readily replied. "In those incidents from ten years ago involving the people of the forest's edge and the Red Beards... You had the leading clan head Zattsu Suun attack the merchant caravan heading for Sym, the envoys from Banarm, and the previous militia leaders. Those are the three incidents I've been able to clearly identify, but I'm sure you've done much more aside from those. Going even further back to thirty years in the past, I suspect that you also murdered your father and older brother, the previous Count Turan and the next in line."

"You..."

"There was no way you would be able to bear living a life in the shadows. And that's why you took care of your father and brother, right? I couldn't find any

proof on the matter, but first your older brother fell from a totos and broke his neck, and then less than a year later the previous count passed away from illness. I'm assuming that 'illness' came from poisonous herbs from Sym."

"You... You dare try to bring me, the head of the noble Turan house, down without any proof whatsoever...?" Cyclaeus retorted as he glared at Kamyua Yoshu's tall frame as if he was staring at an amoeba.

As for Kamyua Yoshu, he just kept on looking back with that mysterious gaze and a relaxed smile.

"You want to charge me for acting disrespectfully toward a noble? If you really turn out to be innocent, then go ahead. After all, I intend to keep heaping on more disrespect from here on out. What I've discussed up till now have all been crimes far in the past... But you don't have any intention of curbing your ambition from here on out, now do you?"

"You insolent..."

"I tried going ahead and stretching my imagination to its limit. First you murdered your own family, then employed slaves to expand your fortune, and used the people of the forest's edge to secure even greater prosperity... So just what sort of plans have you drawn up for the future beyond that?"

Cyclaeus was silent.

"Among the houses of the three counts of Genos, the Turan now hold the most power. So much so that you can stand shoulder to shoulder with Duke Genos himself. In that case, your next target can't be anything else but Duke Genos's fortune. You started off by taking control of the trade of foods, and now you're expanding into metalwork. Just last month, I hear you entered into an exclusive trade contract with Jeland, the town in Jagar famous for its steel."

He must have been talking about the merchant group led by Diel's father.

"From what I'm told, those metalwork traders visiting from the south have been entrusted with providing all the cookware sold in the castle town, as well as the weapons used by soldiers. Once that's all set in place, are you planning on taking control of the stonemason or construction groups next? While Duke Marstein Genos is occupied with official business, you plot to plunder all the

profits earned in the castle town, don't you, Count Cyclaeus?"

"It goes without saying that that is all baseless slander..."

It felt as if I could sense a pitch black miasma rising inside Cyclaeus's small body.

His pale eyes had finally taken on the glare of an injured beast. And opposing him, Kamyua Yoshu just kept wearing the same thin smile.

"So without proof, you can just wave everything away by calling it slander, eh? Well, the only matters I can accuse you of with raw logic are those incidents from ten years back. But if I can prove those crimes, that would be enough to bring home a clear victory, so I'll have to leave the rest to Duke Genos at that point."

"You accursed fool...! The blood of Mahyudra runs in your veins, so who would ever believe what you have to say?!" Ciluel exploded for the first time in a while. "Sir Zylus! As the vice-chief legal officer, I would like you to make a clear statement! Is it not fitting for that scoundrel to be whipped and then driven out of Genos?!"

"If you intend to make claims of disrespect, that should be properly judged according to the laws of Genos," the old man calmly responded. "However... Before that, it is necessary to hear out and examine this Kamyua Yoshu man's claims regarding the incidents ten years ago."

"What?! That's utterly ridiculous! It's all slander by this man, meant to unjustly bring about our downfall!"

"In that case, it is important to prove that it is in fact slander. And as you can see, they have gone so far as to prepare a witness," Zylus said, glancing over at Bartha. "We must start by determining in an official trial whether this woman Bartha's words or your own are the truth."

"Insanity! Are you claiming the words of some bandit hold the same weight as a noble's?!"

"This bandit has gone so far as to acknowledge her own crimes in order to testify against you. And so I would say the question of the weight of one's words is not relevant here."

“Sir Zylus, you... You come from a branch of the Saturas bloodline, do you not?” Ciluel murmured, looking even more cornered than his brother.

And as Ciluel got all worked up again, Cyclaeus once more closed his eyes.

“So the house of Saturas has been spurred on by the foolish second son of Count Daleim to turn on our Turan house, has it?! You intend to use this conspiracy to bring about our noble house’s downfall, do you?!”

“Your statement just now is what I would call baseless slander. I was invited here not as a member of the house of Saturas, but in my role as legal officer.”

“As if anyone could believe such words! You formulated this plot aiming for our fortune! You’re nothing but a mundt, scrounging for carrion flesh to pick clean!”

Zylus deeply furrowed his brow, looking truly displeased. “I ask that you hold your tongue, Lord Ciluel. You have used muddled words, intimidation, and outright avoiding the questions asked of you not only now, but also with the reasonable queries posed by the leading clan heads of the forest’s edge. It should be clear to anyone just whose words are more reasonable here, without needing to wait for an official hearing.”

“Who cares what the people of the forest’s edge have to say?! They’re nothing but a group of filthy barbarians who slurp down giba blood!”

It was obvious Ciluel had completely lost it.

Zylus gave a sour look as he held his tongue, while Kamyua Yoshu flashed a smile and took up the reins.

“Lord Ciluel, leader of the militia... In actuality, I’ve only raised a single point so far without firm proof. But I suppose I could see you writing off those words as slander with that in mind.”

Hearing that, Ciluel turned in utter bewilderment to face Kamyua Yoshu.

Still wearing a faint smile, the aloof bodyguard narrowed his eyes as he stared back.

“Everything I’ve discussed up till now required an unshakeable pact between the two of you in order to carry out. Since Count Cyclaeus is the head of the

house of Turan, I had suspected him as the primary offender, but...now that I'm finally getting a good look at you firsthand, that assumption has been shaken."

Ciluel sat there, his body trembling.

"Could it be...that it was you rather than Count Cyclaeus who drafted up this whole plot, Lord Ciluel?"

The instant those words slipped free from Kamyua Yoshu's lips, Ciluel's hand shot to his hip.

However, there was no sword attached to his leather belt. Thanks to that, nobody instantly reacted. What was there instead, though, was some small silver ornament, which didn't look in any way like a weapon.

Actually, it seemed more like a bell or something, which Ciluel soon rang, signaling the large curtain behind him to audibly swing open.

Just as Ai Fa had sensed, there were dozens of soldiers waiting there, and all of them were holding drawn bows notched with arrows.

"Nobody move! If you do, I'll send every last one of your souls to Selva!" Ciluel shouted, with a loud bark of triumphant laughter.

"I can't believe this..." Zylus sputtered in shock. "H-Have you gone mad, Lord Ciluel? Both Lord Melfried and the son of house Banarm, Lord—"

"If they're all dead, then their rank doesn't matter in the least! Our foolish father and brother proved that full well!" Ciluel shouted, ducking down atop his chair. Was there a steel plate to protect him from stray arrows or something hidden in its huge back?

Half of the soldiers kneeled down while the others remained standing, meaning they were prepared to fire their arrows from two separate rows. And there had to be at least thirty of them in total. If they all fired their bows, there wouldn't be anywhere to escape here in this room.

"You're a fool, Kamyua Yoshu! And so are all of you who let him smooth-talk you! After every last one of you is dead, the house of Turan will rule over Genos for all eternity!"

Even as Ciluel raged away madly, Cyclaeus just kept sitting beside him with his

eyes closed. The smile had vanished from his bluish-gray face, and without it, he just looked like a sickly, decrepit old man whose power had left him.

As for Ai Fa and the other hunters of the forest's edge, they all didn't look shaken in the least, just profoundly angry.

"So you've gone and acknowledged your crimes without even needing to wait for the trial?" Kamyua Yoshu casually asked. "I'd like to say you've saved us some trouble... But it's not like you're avoiding judgment either way. You're just trying to cover up your old crimes with new ones."

"Silence, you insolent fool! Every last one of you will die here and now!"

"You really intend to make enemies of the ducal houses of both Genos and Banarm? You may be a member of a count's house, but even you won't be able to escape being executed for this."

"During the meeting, our guests from the forest's edge suddenly grew violent... We had no choice but to order our men to fire their arrows in order to protect ourselves," Ciluel said in a voice like boiling sludge, moistening his thick lips with his tongue. "Though it was truly unfortunate, Lord Melfried and our guest from Banarm got caught up in what followed... I'd imagine Duke Genos will be quite distraught at having lost his precious heir."

"I see. So you had that in mind when you took away Melfried's blades too. Still, he's just as skilled and brave as the hunters of the forest's edge, so—"

"The time for arguing is past!"

For a second time, Ciluel reached out and rang that silver bell.

Instantly, the arrows went flying... or at least, that's what I figured.

I wasn't exactly able to see it myself, after all. That was because the moment the bell rang, someone kicked out the legs of my stool and the world flipped around me.

As my back thudded hard on the ground, I heard two strange sounds. The first of them was someone's muffled groan, while the other was a sharp grass whistle blown by a hunter of the forest's edge.

"You're not injured, are you, Asuta?" Ai Fa asked from overhead.

Sure enough, she had been the one to knock over my stool. Glancing up at her, I saw that she was now kneeling right next to me.

She was holding onto the legs of a stool, which now had numerous arrows stuck in it. With nowhere to run, she had apparently acted swiftly and used her own seat as a shield. Considering those soldiers looked to only be around five or six meters away, that really was an astounding feat of reflexes and pure physical ability.



As I lay there on my back, I glanced around and saw that the other hunters had protected the rest of our comrades in the same way. Gulaf Zaza and Gazraan Rutim stood imposingly in front of the former members of the Suun clan, Melfried had Zylus covered, and Bartha protected Welhide. Not a single person present looked to be injured.

Just as I was about to breathe a sigh of relief, Kamyua Yoshu's voice whispered into my ear, "Whew, that was a close one. I never imagined they'd resort to such forceful methods."

I figured he sounded awful close, and as it turned out he was on his hands and knees right behind me. And underneath his cloak, he was cradling Leito like an infant. Since he didn't have a stool to use as a shield, Kamyua Yoshu had hugged the ground behind Ai Fa in order to escape the danger.

"Wh-What about Cyclaeus and Ciluel...?"

"No worries there. Looks like they're dealing with an unexpected visitor, though."

Not getting what he meant, I sat up, and what I saw was definitely unexpected.

Ciluel's weighty frame was hanging in the air. And the one holding it was Donda Ruu. In his left hand he held a stool riddled with arrows, and in his right he had grabbed Ciluel by the collar as he stood in the center of the room.

"You damn criminal... How dare you attempt to do such a thing to my comrades," Donda Ruu's voice rumbled as Ciluel desperately gasped. At their feet, his weighty-looking chair had tumbled over.

And then, there was Cyclaeus.

The older of the wicked nobles wasn't exactly able to move freely either. As to why, it was because a figure clad in a hunter's cloak had pressed a crescent-shaped blade up to his throat.

The boy had flaming red disheveled hair and skinny limbs, and was clearly a hunter of Masara who I could never mistake even from behind.

"Jeeda... What are you doing in a place like this?" Bartha quietly asked.

Jeeda stayed turned away, offering no response.

Instead, the one to answer was Ai Fa, as she pulled me up while still keeping on guard with the stool.

“He has been hiding up in the ceiling, it seems. I sensed his presence slip out several times, but you didn’t notice, Bartha of Masara?”

“Embarrassing as it is to admit, I didn’t notice a thing. Apparently I’m not on the same level as you or that idiot son of mine as a hunter.” Bartha’s face looked somewhat sad as I stared at her from the side, her long hair hanging down. “Jeeda, don’t hurt him. What he needs to face isn’t a blade fueled by revenge, but the law’s judgment.”

Even still, Jeeda didn’t respond.

If he had been hiding up in the ceiling, he must have also heard Bartha’s words brimming with resolve. When that thought came to mind, it caused me to choke up a bit too.

“Well, what are you going to do? As you can see, your masters have fallen into our hands,” Donda Ruu solemnly proclaimed.

The soldiers up along the inner wall had all frozen in place with their second volley of arrows at the ready.

“You can’t silence us with such piddly arrows. How about you try drawing those blades at your hips next? Not that it will change anything...”

Thanks to the face guards on their helmets, it was impossible to read the expressions on those soldiers. However, I could see a number of them glancing over toward Melfried.

“What are you doing?! Kill them!” Ciluel shouted as he was suspended high in the air. “You fired arrows at Melfried! If he makes it out of here alive, you’ll all be hanged! If you value your lives, you’ll kill every last one of them!”

“That is untrue. The crimes here all belong to the traitor Ciluel,” Melfried emotionlessly stated. “You members of the militia were unable to go against his orders. However, as of this moment, this man has lost the right to act as your leader. From here on out, you are to follow my orders as leader of the ducal

guard.”

“Don’t be fooled! If you lay down your weapons, your whole family line will be wiped out!”

While the bows remained taut, the tips of the arrows swayed as if searching for a target.

It was then that the door behind us suddenly flew open and Jimon came tumbling into the room. Well, not that he entered of his own will, though. As his back slammed down into the carpet, the man started twisting and groaning in anguish.

“Gahaha! You certainly went all-out here, Donda Ruu! I was getting nervous and starting to think I wouldn’t have a chance to shine!”

It was Dan Rutim.

And Ludo and Darmu Ruu were there too, brandishing their weapons as they stepped inside.

“You didn’t enter through the window, Dan Rutim?” Dari Sauti questioned, only for Dan Rutim to give another hearty chuckle.

“This room’s windows have iron bars over them! So we had to clamber up to the neighboring room’s windows and let ourselves in that way! Deek Dom’s group stayed behind to hold back the soldiers outside!” Dan Rutim replied, rubbing under his round nose. “Still, this sure is one awful smell! It may be convenient, but we don’t need any giba warding fruit in the Rutim settlement!”

I had completely driven it from my mind, but apparently Dan Rutim had followed the smell of the giba warding fruit to this room. And then the grass whistle Gazraan Rutim blew must have acted as a signal for them to come running.

At any rate, it seemed to have clinched our victory.

Dan Rutim, Ludo and Darmu Ruu, and Rau Lea were all standing there with blades in their hands and the wrath of hunters burning brightly in their eyes. While there were only four of them, they were strong and imposing enough to completely overwhelm the thirty soldiers facing them.

“Cast aside your weapons and surrender. If you follow that command immediately, I promise that you shall not face any greater punishment than confinement,” Melfried stated, at which point the soldiers lowered their bows.

“You fools!” Ciluel angrily roared. And then, Donda Ruu firmly threw the man’s body down at his feet. Ciluel writhed in pain and moaned like a toad on the verge of dying.

“Your name is Melfried, isn’t it? Since you’re the son of the lord of Genos, I’ve got a question I’d like to ask you,” Donda Ruu said, slowly turning to face the young noble. “It’s been made perfectly clear today that this Ciluel man is guilty. But it isn’t definitive yet just how deep Cyclaeus’s crimes go... So does that mean we have to keep treating him as the representative for the lord of Genos?”

“Ciluel’s guilt is indeed clear... As for Count Cyclaeus’s crimes, we will have to hold an official trial,” Melfried replied, his gray eyes still keeping their usual chilliness. “Until that trial is finished, the laws of Genos say that he is to be removed from all official duties.”

“I see... But isn’t it possible he’ll manage to push all his crimes off on his brother in order to escape punishment?”

“As long as he isn’t truly innocent, things won’t play out that way,” an unfamiliar voice interjected.

Rau Lea had been closest to the door, so he swiftly turned that way.

“Who are you? Were there even more troops in hiding?”

The new group clad in white armor was eerily silent as they pushed their way into the room.

Ludo Ruu and the other hunters all immediately moved to face them, but after lining up to block the exit, the soldiers all stopped with machinelike precision.

And then, the tall man right in the center of the group stepped forward without any hesitation.

He was a middle-aged man, and he had long medium-brown hair. His

mustache looked pretentious, to put it bluntly, and he had a slim, elegant figure. He was dressed in a nice-looking yet not gaudy Jagar-style collared vest and cylinder-legged pants. As he approached, his handsome face broke out in a relaxed grin.

Though he was dressed like someone from Jagar, his skin color marked him clearly as a westerner. Overall, he looked to be a noble man overflowing with strength and confidence, and he had a youthful yet majestic air about him.

“Ah, it’s been some time, Lord Welhide. Not since the wedding of the first daughter of Banarm? Anyway, I’m glad to see you doing well.”

Welhide had been pale as he watched Donda Ruu and the others have their exchange, but now he swiftly hung his head. And the soldiers who had tossed aside their bows had started moaning in fear.

“I ordered the soldiers out front to lay down their blades too. It didn’t seem like any of our comrades from the forest’s edge were injured, so that’s certainly a relief.”

Donda Ruu just silently met that grin with a glare.

And from beside me, Kamyua Yoshu casually called out, “Well, well. I never imagined a slouch like you would drag himself all the way here.”

“What are you saying? You are the one who sent a messenger to inform me of Lord Welhide’s arrival, aren’t you? I couldn’t exactly loaf around after hearing of that.” Then, the man looked over to Cyclaeus, who still had Jeeda’s blade pressed to his throat, and sighed. “It truly is a shame that things turned out this way, Count Cyclaeus. You’ve been most skillful at managing the Turan lands, so it’s really making my head hurt thinking of how things will go from here on out.”

As he still sat pressed down into his throne-like chair, Cyclaeus slowly opened his eyes. At once, his face went deathly pale, and a cold sweat started forming on his deeply wrinkled skin.

“It seems my fate is sealed, then...”

“That’s true. I’ll handle things from here to the best of my judgment, so you can just take it easy and wait for your trial.”

“Hmph... I’d certainly like to hear just how you’ll be handling things, and in detail,” Donda Ruu chimed in.

By this point, everyone must have realized just who the man was. And while still grinning, he bowed to Donda Ruu.

“From what I can tell, you seem to be one of the new leading clan heads of the forest’s edge, correct? My first task will surely be reforging a proper bond with all of you. By my name of Duke Marstein Genos, allow me to offer my apologies for my impoliteness up until now.”

It had been roughly eighty days now since I first arrived at the settlement at the forest’s edge. And now, I had met with the highest authority in all of Genos face to face.

Well, not that he had clearly seen my face just yet, though. It would still be a few hours more before I would talk to him directly, after all.

At any rate, that was how the curtain closed on the chaotic third meeting between Cyclaeus and the leading clan heads of the forest’s edge.

Chapter 2: Whirling Intentions

1

Cyclaeus and Ciluel had been arrested as criminals, but that didn't mean that everything had been settled.

The next few days steadily passed as I watched in a sort of quiet awe. By the end of the third day after, it finally started to sink in that the whole commotion was finally over. But in actuality, things wouldn't really be done and dusted until those wicked nobles were properly judged at a trial.

However, the trial for their crimes couldn't be carried out in just three days. From what I was told it would take quite a bit of preparation since they were handling nobles, and there was an additional urgent complication that required delays on top of that: Cyclaeus had collapsed from illness. And it had happened right in front of our eyes too.

On the day of the meeting, after Jeeda withdrew his blade, the ducal guards had moved to arrest Cyclaeus, but the man had already lost consciousness.

Doctors were immediately summoned from the castle, and their diagnosis was that Cyclaeus's illness had reached a critical state. From what we were told, he had taken such a mental blow that he had lost the strength needed to fight back against it.

If he was moved carelessly, his life could be at risk. And if he died before the trial, it would become very difficult to properly prosecute Ciluel for his crimes. And so, it was decided that Cyclaeus would be nursed back to health at his own manor, where he would be kept under watch.

"Regardless, all his rights as Count Turan have been suspended, and the ducal guards are keeping him under heavy watch so he can't have any outside contact. There's no need to worry anymore," Kamyua Yoshu informed us the day after the meeting, his words having come for Duke Genos. Apparently the plan was that the doctors would keep treating him, and then he would be

moved to the castle once his illness stabilized.

And there was another matter that needed to be discussed too: how Bartha and Jeeda would be handled.

Bartha was a remnant of a bandit group, while Jeeda had set foot in the castle town without a pass, so sure enough they both were moved to Genos Castle. Of course Bartha was also an important witness, so part of the reason was to protect her. Bottom line, her trial would happen after Cyclaeus and Ciluel were judged. But Bartha had resolved herself from the start, so she looked perfectly calm as she followed the instructions from the ducal guards.

The real issue was Jeeda.

Even after Duke Marstein Genos appeared and declared an end to the whole commotion, Jeeda didn't remove his blade from Cyclaeus's throat.

"If I send these criminals' heads flying here and now, there won't be any need for a trial!" Jeeda had shouted.

And he must have thought he could run away with his mother in order to save her life too. I could see that tragic yet brave resolve in him, and I just couldn't find the words to respond. As for Bartha, she just said, "Don't go spouting foolhardy stuff like that," as she stared sadly at her son's back.

"I'm at a loss..." Marstein commented while stroking his mustache. Melfried had accepted a blade from a subordinate, and now his gray eyes had a chilly glare in them. It was starting to look like either Jeeda or Cyclaeus wouldn't make it out of there alive, but then Donda Ruu's solemn voice filled the room.

"Jeeda... That's your name, right, hunter of Masara? Do you intend to trample all over your mother's resolve?"

"Shut up! This has nothing to do with you people of the forest's edge!"

"That's not true. This female hunter of Masara, Bartha, had a firm will and resolve to strike down our shared enemy alongside us," Donda Ruu declared as he looked down on the small figure with his blade pressed to Cyclaeus's throat.

That leading clan head surely would have been able to take away the boy's weapon by force, but instead he kept on talking.

“Cutting someone down, regardless of the law, just because it’s more convenient... You know that your own mother put her life on the line in order to expose shameless men like that, don’t you?”

“That’s...!”

“And you’re the one who put her in that predicament, Jeeda of Masara.” There wasn’t any expression showing on Donda Ruu’s face then, but there was an intense light shining in his blue eyes. “If you had not grown obsessed with revenge and left your mother’s side, Bartha of Masara would not have chosen this path. After all, she chose it so that you would not be a criminal, and to make up for having planted the seeds of revenge in her own son.”

Underneath his hunter’s cloak, Jeeda’s back had started fiercely trembling.

“By placing her life on the line to bear witness against these criminals, she could avoid your blade being soaked in blood. She risked her very life not for revenge, but for the sake of your future. And you intend to trample upon her resolve and stain your blade with bloody vengeance?”

At that, Jeeda finally dropped his weapon.

From that moment until the ducal guards arrested him and took him out of the room, he just kept on hanging his head, so right to the end I wasn’t able to see just what sort of expression he was wearing on his youthful face.

“Well, he sneaked into a noble’s manor and stuck a blade up against its owner’s throat, so normally he’d be executed for sure, but there’s the circumstances to keep in mind here. Fortunately Duke Genos isn’t as inflexible as his son, so I’d expect him to show mercy.”

I must have been making quite a pathetic face, as Kamyua Yoshu whispered that into my ear when Jeeda was led away.

And there was one other person who was arrested and taken into custody: Zuuro Suun.

Once Cyclaeus, Ciluel, Jeeda, and Bartha were all removed by the ducal guards, I figured that would settle things for the moment. But then, Zuuro Suun suddenly threw himself at Marstein’s feet.

“Oh lord of Genos... I am also a criminal who broke the laws of both Genos and the forest’s edge, so can I not also surrender myself to you...?”

The people of the forest’s edge present had all levelheadedly watched over things as Marstein took command, but this made them erupt in a commotion. In particular, Gulaf Zaza stepped forward, both of his eyes blazing bright with rage.

“What are you saying now, you bastard? It can’t be... Have you lost the guts to face our intended punishment for you?”

“I’m not afraid of having my soul returned to the forest at this point... But I believe if the laws of Genos seek to judge me as a criminal, then that’s how I should be handled...” Zuuro Suun listlessly replied as he groveled at Marstein’s feet. “The townsfolk know we people of the forest’s edge... No, we members of the Suun clan are protected by the nobles in the castle... Even so, from what I hear, their suspicions and anger were partially quieted when judgment was passed on Zattsu and Tei Suun... In that case, if I’m judged properly by the laws of Genos as the last great criminal left, then both the lord of this land and the people of the forest’s edge should both be able to regain their honor together. Isn’t that possible...?”

“But...”

“Also... If I am fairly judged for my crimes, then it will be known that those left behind...my former family members, are not criminals, and that they were justly pardoned according to Genos’s laws...”

“Hmm...” Marstein mumbled as he swept aside his long bangs. Then, his wise-looking brown eyes turned toward the old man sitting in the corner of the room.

“Legal Officer Zylus, according to the laws of Genos, what sort of punishment do you believe this man Zuuro Suun would face for his crimes? I am asking for your personal opinion rather than any sort of official ruling.”

“Yes, well... To begin with, the law that the fruits of Morga are not to be pillaged was made specifically for the people of the forest’s edge, and it has not ever been the subject of official adjudication. However... Considering it occurred over the course of more than ten years and involved dozens of

relatives as well as a neglect of their hunting duty, the order to do so could be seen as a clear act of rebellion against Genos... In my humble opinion, it would merit a weightier sentence than death, ten years of penal servitude."

"I see. Ten years of penal servitude, is it?" Marstein repeated with a big nod, and then he stared down at Zuuro Suun's rounded back. "Penal servitude is the heaviest punishment that exists in Genos, and is far more intense than standard prison labor. Virtually no one survives more than five years, which is why it is reserved for criminals for whom even execution is too light a punishment. That is what you will be given. With that in mind, wouldn't having your comrades from the forest's edge take your head make for a much easier end?"

"Ten years... In just ten years, my crimes will be forgiven...?"

"Yes. Ten years of penal servitude, harsher and more hopeless than what even slaves face. From what I can recall, no one has lasted for a full ten years since Genos was founded."

"Hope... I *do* have hope... If I can call myself a person of the forest's edge again after ten years, then what greater hope could there be...?" Zuuro Suun replied in a trembling voice, and then he turned our way.

He seemed to lack the strength needed to shift his sagging face into a proper expression, but it looked like there were now tears welling up just a bit in his little eyes.

Yamiru Lea, Oura, Tsuvai, Diga, Doddo, and Mida... Those six former members of his family all just silently stared back at him.

"I do not know if I will be able to endure ten years of suffering to atone for ten years of leading my people down the wrong path... But if ten years from now I still live and return to the settlement... I would like to once more entrust my fate to my comrades at the forest's edge..."

"When that time comes, I'll judge your crimes with my own two eyes," Gulaf Zaza replied in a firm tone.

Nobody raised an objection, and so Zuuro Suun was ultimately taken away by the ducal guards too.

With that, the commotion finally came to an end.

Duke Marstein Genos had given us a firm promise that Cyclaeus and Ciluel would be justly tried. No matter which of them was the principal offender, the weight of their crimes would be equally heavy. They would either be executed or face lifelong confinement, but either way, they would never again be free to act.

“I had put my trust in Count Turan’s abilities and granted him the role of mediating matters with the people of the forest’s edge. Now that it has been proven that command was a mistake, it’s my responsibility to pledge myself to wiping away that shame... Until a new mediator is determined, I intend to personally take on the role of forging bonds with the people of the forest’s edge,” Marstein stated, keeping a cheerful grin all throughout. “Even now, the people of the forest’s edge play an irreplaceable role in supporting the prosperity of Genos, and are our precious comrades. I swear that I’ll spare no effort in order to clear up any misunderstandings and discord between my people.”

This was our first time meeting Marstein, and it was hard to say just how much we could trust him. But if we *couldn’t* trust him, then the people of the forest’s edge wouldn’t have a place here in Genos any longer.

At any rate, the leading clan heads of the forest’s edge announced that until Cyclaeus’s illness stabilized and his trial began, they wished to keep living as they had been.

And then, there was us.

Even if we were told to keep living as we had been, there was a complication getting in the way. And that was the fact that Duke Genos had told us, “Please continue to keep your guard up.”

But what exactly were we supposed to be on guard against?

Apparently the answer was the private army employed by Cyclaeus and Ciluel.

Both of them had been arrested, and in turn all their authority was suspended. The guard unit assigned to the house of Turan was temporarily dissolved and it was being looked into whether or not they were involved in the incidents that had occurred, while the militia was being reformed under a new commander. At this point, it would be impossible for those wicked nobles to

use those soldiers as pawns.

But Cyclaeus and Ciluel also employed a private army of soldiers to carry out tasks secretly in the shadows. For example, tasks such as dressing up as people of the forest's edge and raiding plantations.

Even if it was their lord's order, it was certainly hard to imagine the militia or the retainers of house Turan staining their hands with such blatantly criminal acts. And so, the assumption was that they kept a secret group of leashed ruffians around to handle such tasks that went against the laws of Genos.

The one to come to that conclusion was none other than Kamyua Yoshu. When Zattsu Suun fell prey to illness ten years ago, Cyclaeus and Ciluel would have needed some fresh pawns to take his place... Kamyua Yoshu had delivered that incredibly disquieting report to both the leading clan heads of the forest's edge and the lord of Genos.

"They must be better at hiding themselves than Zattsu Suun, though, since I just can't seem to get a lead on them. Those ruffians may have lost their owners, but there's no knowing what sort of oaths they might have taken, so everyone should make sure to stay on guard," Kamyua Yoshu had apparently warned.

Thanks to that, neither the Fa nor Ruu clans were able to resume business. After all, since the Ruu and their related clans were no longer on break, we weren't able to gather up the guards needed.

Apparently Marstein raised the proposal of dispatching members of the ducal guard to watch over us, but they were shorthanded from needing to keep an eye on Cyclaeus and guard Barthia on top of everything else they did, so they weren't able to offer enough men to satisfy Donda Ruu.

"The militia has enough personnel to offer, but we don't know just how far-reaching Ciluel's corrupting influence really was," Marstein had stated, which was an opinion also shared by Kamyua Yoshu. From what I was told, the leadership of the militia had strong ties to the house of Turan, which made reorganizing them quite difficult.

And so, we had no choice but to exercise some self-restraint.

Still, we were just barely able to resume our work with the inns, if nothing else.

We prepared the food early in the morning, then early risers like Ai Fa and Ludo Ruu acted as our bodyguards while we delivered it to the inns and made it back by the time the sun hit its peak. We resumed work in that fashion two days after the meeting, and by the third day we also increased the amount of fresh meat we were providing.

“Since they can’t eat it at your stalls during the day, I’ve had more customers wanting giba cooking for dinner,” explained Nail, the owner of the Sledgehammer.

As a result, The Sledgehammer ordered sixty meals and enough fresh meat for twenty more each day, while The Great Southern Tree went with seventy meals and fresh meat for an additional thirty. The Great Southern Tree was one thing since it was a large establishment, but it kinda amazed me that a small inn made by remodeling a home like The Sledgehammer ordered that much, and from what I was told, neither ever had any leftovers.

Nail continued. “Our rooms have all been filled every day, and there have been even more customers from other inns than before stopping by for dinner too. Thanks to your efforts, we’re hardly selling any karon or kimyuus meals at this point.”

“Ah... I don’t know what to say to that...”

“As long as you don’t start selling your giba cooking to a great many other inns, I can’t imagine this commotion dying down. Rather than shrieking with delight, I actually feel vaguely apprehensive at how much business our dining room is seeing... So much so that I can’t help but feel it would be good of you to hurry up and start offering your cooking at other inns.”

I certainly did have a desire to expand my business.

However, I couldn’t advance my talks with The Kimyuus’s Tail or The Westerly Wind at this point. Until Cyclaeus and Ciluel’s mysterious private army was detained and the danger subsided, for the time being I just had to maintain the status quo.

Thanks to that, the Ruu women and I just did our best to make the food in the morning, deliver it to the post town by wagon, then return to the forest's edge with newly purchased fresh vegetables. We took turns taking care of other work and used our spare time experimenting with our cooking. It made for some really busy yet peaceful days.

It probably went without saying, but Ai Fa and I were both still staying at the Ruu settlement for the time being. The former members of the main Suun house returned to the Lea, Rutim, and Dom clans, but since things were still so unstable, it felt too dangerous to have us go back to the Fa house.

And at the Ruu settlement they were quite shorthanded during the day since the hunters had gone back to work. Even so, there were still boys under the age of thirteen and old men to help out, not to mention Ryada Ruu and Mida. So at the very least it was still safer than me and Ai Fa staying on our own, even if my clan head ended up biting her lip over the matter again.

At any rate, we were able to spend those days in peace thanks to everyone's hard work and effort.

And so, three days passed as I remained vaguely on edge, only for there to be a big change on day four. It came to us from Kamyua Yoshu, who had been acting as Marstein's messenger and visiting the Ruu settlement each day.

However, before I got to that, I was shocked by the redheaded boy standing by his side.

2

"Jeeda! You got released from the castle?!" I exclaimed when I saw them enter the main Ruu house's kitchen.

It was currently early evening on the nineteenth of the white month. The sun was already sinking in the west, and the kitchen was full of the aroma of a freshly made dinner.

"I'm glad you're okay. You didn't get whipped or anything, right?"

Jeeda silently shook his head, with a yellow fire in his eyes. When I saw his expression like he was forcing down everything he was feeling inside, I pulled

back my relieved smile.

Even if he was personally all right, he was probably in no state to feel happy over that. It left me at a loss for words, but Kamyua Yoshu then cheerfully chimed in as if trying to smooth things over.

“Though he was guilty of sneaking into the castle town, pointing his blade at a noble, and drawing his sword in the post town, none of that would have happened without Cyclaeus’s wrongdoing, so Duke Genos pardoned his crimes. And the wanted posters are being removed from the post town too, so he should be a free man.”

The two of them had already met back at Cyclaeus’s manor, but it still felt odd somehow, seeing them standing side by side like this.

And as he stroked his long and narrow stubbly chin, Kamyua Yoshu suddenly turned his gaze to my side.

“Hey there, Ai Fa. So you’re back too, huh? Did you make any catches today?”

“Yes,” Ai Fa nodded, a cautious look in her eyes. She had resumed her hunting by this point too.

There had been ten days between when Lefreya kidnapped me and the day of the meeting. Considering Ai Fa had taken that long off from hunting, it was no surprise that even she had been unable to stand it any longer.

Then there was the fact that Donda Ruu and the men under him had started working again too. No matter how much she might be worried about me, Donda Ruu and everyone else were entrusting their family’s safety to Ryada Ruu and the others, so she couldn’t be the only one without enough resolve to take this as good enough... Or at least, she could solve the problem of her worrying by throwing herself into her work hunting giba.

And amazingly enough, Ai Fa had hunted down a giba every day for the last four days, always returning to the Ruu settlement before everyone else. It was at the point where the number of giba around the Fa house would be on the decline, so those really were some incredible results.

However, Ai Fa’s hair also smelled sweeter than it had before. That meant she was once again performing sacrificial hunting and coating herself in the scent of

giba summoning fruit.

“It’s only natural to do so, seeing how the number of giba in the area has decreased. I always use sacrificial hunting during such periods.”

Even if she said so, that wasn’t exactly enough to wipe away my concerns. But reflecting on what I had once told Darmu Ruu, I had no choice but to trust in Ai Fa’s readiness and skill as a hunter.

“So, is Donda Ruu back too? I hurried over here again today as Duke Genos’s proxy, after all.”

“Looking at how low the sun has sunk, I’d say he should be back. Did you not stop by the main building?”

“Not yet, because today I came with a message for both Asuta and Donda Ruu. I wanted to make sure you heard it directly, Asuta.”

“Did they decide how I’ll be handled?”

The question of what to do with the fact that I had come from overseas had been left on hold up till now.

Though Ai Fa shot him a piercing glare, Kamyua Yoshu just brushed that off with a smile.

“They’re still deliberating on that. Besides, Duke Genos figures it’d be unjust to discuss that matter before Cyclaeus is properly tried.”

“Then what in the world do you have to tell me?”

“I want the leading clan head to hear it too. Would it be possible to have a little of everyone’s time before dinner?”

“Of course. We’re already finished preparing the food.”

And so, I ended up heading over to the main building along with Ai Fa, Kamyua Yoshu, and Jeeda. After handing over our blades to Mia Lea Ruu we stepped inside, and perhaps because it was so close to dinner, there were already four men gathered in the main hall.

“Kamyua Yoshu, huh? Is there finally some movement from the castle?” Donda Ruu asked, a calm look in his blue eyes.

Jiza Ruu had his usual smile accompanied with an emotionless gaze, while Darmu Ruu's eyes were burning bright with danger. And as for Ludo Ruu, he looked a bit concerned with his brow furrowed as he stared at Jeeda.

"I suppose I'd have to say there was, but it's all pretty tricky. Cyclaeus is still laid up in his sickbed while Ciluel has firmly shut his mouth, so we have no way of searching out what their private troops are up to."

"Hmph. So what exactly are you here for, then?"

"I have a message from Duke Marstein Genos. I'd imagine the contents aren't much to the taste of you people of the forest's edge, but I ask that you listen all the way to the end," Kamyua Yoshu replied as he lightly seated himself at the foot of the group.

Jeeda sat down beside him, while Ai Fa and I chose a spot off to the side where we could see everyone.

"What I've come to discuss concerns Cyclaeus's daughter, Lady Lefreya."

"Lefreya? Why are we talking about Cyclaeus's daughter at this point...? Isn't that girl being held as a criminal?"

"Yes. The plan is for her to face half a year's confinement as punishment. And, well... I've come to tell you Duke Genos was proposing lightening that sentence."

Donda Ruu's glare instantly grew more intense.

"I don't get the meaning of this at all. Could you give me a satisfactory explanation?"

"Yes, right. I figure this'll be good for your people too, but you see... Duke Genos is thinking he wants to strip Cyclaeus of his rank. Which is to say, he wants to remove his title of count before the official trial begins. Of course, that's perfectly normal considering how serious the crimes he's suspected of are."

"Stripping him of his rank... So regardless of the results of the trial, that man will never again be able to call himself Count Turan?"

"That's right. It's quite disreputable to have a count on trial, and there's a risk

the interrogators and legal officers could take that into account. So the thinking is that for all sorts of reasons, it'd be better to strip him of the rank beforehand."

"That's all well and good... But it's not like we can just keep grinning about all of this, now can we?" Donda Ruu replied, ironically with a grin despite his words. In other words, his fighting instincts seemed to have fired up. "So when you said you wanted to discuss that girl... The intention's to have her inherit the rank, eh?"

"Yes, but that's also completely natural. Though Lady Lefreya is also a criminal, it was only a minor crime with a sentence of just half a year's confinement. And since she is the legitimate child of the head of her house, that inheritance can't be shifted."

"You're saying abducting Asuta was a minor crime?" Ai Fa sharply interjected, only for Kamyua Yoshu to shoot her back a smile as if to pacify her.

"That's ultimately just in comparison to Cyclaeus's crimes. An old trick nobles like to employ is throwing money around to help make crimes on the level of abducting commoners disappear... But, since it was obvious that wouldn't work on you people of the forest's edge, things ended up the way they did this time around."

Nobody had anything to say to that.

"Ah, that was a misleading statement there, lumping all nobles together. Naturally I'm just referring to unscrupulous nobles like Cyclaeus. Duke Genos or Sir Polarth would never go dirtying their hands with lawbreaking in the first place, so no worries there."

Ai Fa just sat there silently with a look of disgust, while Donda Ruu pressed, "And...? She's still just a childish little brat, isn't she? Here at the forest's edge, you're not qualified to be the head of your house till you're at least fifteen."

"In the western kingdom anyone can inherit a rank, regardless of age or gender. But having a guardian is essential, so there will be rather serious restrictions placed on her. She'll be given a guardian without significant ties to Cyclaeus, who will serve as a firm foundation to make sure the name of house Turan isn't sullied any further."

“Hmph... I see.”

“Of course, since Lady Lefreya has the previous offense of having kidnapped Asuta, the restrictions on her will be even harsher than usual, and her every move will be carefully monitored. With that said, it’ll be the guardian really running the house of Turan from here on out, while Lady Lefreya will be the head of the house in name only until the next heir is born to take the guardian’s place,” Kamyua Yoshu said, shrugging his shoulders under his cloak. “Duke Genos doesn’t have the authority needed to eliminate the house of Turan itself. That’s because it was a direct command from the king of Selva that split these lands between the Genos, Turan, Saturas, and Daleim houses, and then placed Duke Genos in charge. In that case, the only option Duke Genos has for swiftly taking down Cyclaeus for the crimes he’s suspected of is to have his daughter inherit the rank.”

“If that’s what the laws of the kingdom state, then go ahead and do as you please. But what’s this about pardoning the girl’s crimes? Regardless of whether or not someone’s a noble or whatever, a crime’s still a crime, is it not?” Donda Ruu grumbled.

“Yup. But we can’t exactly have someone in prison inherit a rank. And on the other hand we can’t delay Cyclaeus’s trial an additional half a year either, which made this quite the distressing decision for Duke Genos, I’d say.”

“But what does he have to hesitate and agonize over? From what you’ve said, you make it sound like status is more important than the law.”

“You’re certainly right. The people of the city of stone definitely do value rank more highly. Stubborn folks like Melfried who think otherwise are a rarity,” Kamyua Yoshu replied, the ends of his eyebrows drooping a bit as he smiled. “If Cyclaeus’s trial begins while he’s still a count, that scandal will reach all the way to the capital. And if things go poorly, that could lead to the capital interfering with the governing of Genos. While Genos is a remote town far from the capital, it’s also exceptionally prosperous even for Selva, so folks from the capital surely see it as a dangerous element. And the lord of Genos has to make sure to keep such concerns in mind.”

“Hmph... This sure has gotten overblown,” Donda Ruu stated, his smile

disappearing as he scratched his rugged mustache.

As he stared back at the clearly displeased clan head, Kamyua Yoshu continued on, “So... I know this probably won’t please you people of the forest’s edge to hear either, but I have a further statement from Duke Genos.”

“You don’t need to go prefacing everything. If you were tasked with playing the role of messenger, then hurry up and do your job already.”

“Yes, right away. Ahem... In addition to the pardon for Lady Lefreya, Duke Genos also wishes to pardon Barthia of Masara.”

Donda Ruu’s eyes suddenly narrowed, while I turned my gaze to Kamyua Yoshu’s side, at Jeeda.

The boy’s burning gaze was pointed downward, and he wasn’t saying a word.

“Considering she was a remnant of the Red Beard bandit group that went after the fortunes of nobles, she wouldn’t be able to avoid a death sentence. But seeing how she risked her life in order to protect the order in Genos, there’s room for taking extreme circumstances into account... Or at least, that’s the excuse.”

“In other words, we’re being told to accept the pardon of that Lefreya girl’s crimes in order to have the same done for Barthia of Masara, huh?” Donda Ruu asked, his eyes quietly blazing away. “I see... So that’s how nobles do things, is it?”

“Yes. But among nobles, I believe Duke Genos is pretty darn fair and down to earth,” Kamyua Yoshu replied, the ends of his eyebrows drooping again. “If we were dealing with a more run-of-the-mill noble, he would’ve thrust that condition at you in a real condescending manner. But Duke Genos is aware of how coercive his power is as the governing lord, so he made sure to ultimately bring it to you as just a proposal. In order to struggle his way to a solution, he has no choice but to have Lady Lefreya inherit her father’s rank. And so, he was thinking maybe he could bury the hatchet by offering a pardon for Barthia in exchange.”

“Hmph...”

“I figure making the choice to pardon a bandit who brought harm to nobles

was a difficult one for Duke Genos. After all, he'll definitely have to pull some strings in order to obtain the acceptance of those nobles who were robbed by the Red Beards ten-plus years back."

"So to make up for twisting the law, he's twisting it even further, and then burdening himself with having to clean up the mess? Can't say I especially feel for him there."

"Right. You people of the forest's edge really value the law highly, so it's only natural you'd feel that way. And even that bit of kindheartedness from Duke Genos probably just feels like trampling all over Barthia's resolve, right?"

When Kamyua Yoshu said that, Jeeda suddenly looked up. His beastlike yellow eyes fixed straight ahead on Donda Ruu. "Leading clan head of the forest's edge, Donda Ruu... I would like to say just a few words too."

The leading clan head silently stared back at the boy.

Jeeda's eyes blazed even brighter... and then his wild head of hair lowered all the way down to the floor. "Please, accept that noble's proposal and save my mother... I'll offer up my life in return if that's what it takes."



Donda Ruu remained silent.

“Just like you’ve said, I strayed from the proper path. Thanks to that, my own mother has been arrested as a criminal. If this all ends in her death, I’d never be able to face my father Goram.”

But still, no response was offered.

“I realize how unsightly what I’m saying really is. And I’m sure my mom wouldn’t be happy at being saved like this... But even so, I don’t want to let her die.”

From my position off to the side, hard as it was to see from here, I watched Jeeda rub his forehead against the floor. His eyes were blazing like flames, and his youthful face was twisted with anguish as he cried out in a muffled voice.

“I know I’ve already said it, but even if she obtains the rank of countess, Lady Lefreya won’t have any freedom or power. It may hurt to forgive her crime of kidnapping Asuta, but looking at it another way, that crime alone was enough to ruin the rest of her life. Rather than for just half a year, she’ll spend the remainder of her life like a prisoner, so could I ask that you hold back your rage and frustration over the matter?” Kamyua Yoshu suggested with a meek expression, only for Donda Ruu to slowly and steadily turn his way.

“You certainly are acting awfully modest today. It makes my skin crawl, somehow.”

“Is that so? Well, I can’t help but feel responsible for being the one to drag Barthia out here, you see,” Kamyua Yoshu replied, his drooping eyes narrowing a bit as he smiled, and then he dropped his gaze down to Jeeda’s small back. “And yet he hasn’t thrown so much as a single complaint my way. It really does make my heart ache.”

“No matter what you may have said to her, she was still the one to make her decision in the end. Ultimately, it just goes to show that Barthia of Masara possessed both a powerful resolve and pride. And it was also her own decision to live as a bandit and steal the fortunes of others...” Donda Ruu shot back, looking over Kamyua Yoshu and Jeeda with a firm gaze. “So... In the end, the lord of Genos already made up his mind no matter how we reply, didn’t he?”

“Yes, well, Duke Genos believes that this is both the best and only path possible to go forward with our plans.”

“In that case, do as you please. We intend to take our time from here on out judging if Duke Marstein Genos is a man worth offering up our blades in service to.”

At that, the tears started streaming down Jeeda’s face.

When he saw the boy’s face, wrinkles formed around Donda Ruu’s nose. “Hunters shouldn’t go crying in front of others lightly. How old are you exactly?”

“Fourteen...”

“Fourteen, huh? At the forest’s edge, you aren’t recognized as an adult until you turn fifteen,” Donda Ruu stated with a hearty snort. “Even if you’re a hunter, you’re still just a child. It was a mistake to separate from your mother at such a young age to begin with. And if you regret that, then be certain to never make that same mistake again.”

Jeeda hung his head once more, the tears still dripping down from his eyes.

After staring that way with a troubled grin for a bit, Kamyua Yoshu cheerfully called out, “Now then, if we’ve reached an understanding, I’d like to move on to the next topic.”

“So you don’t intend on shutting that mouth of yours just yet, eh? Even though I’m starving by this point.”

“This will be the last message. In order to form new bonds with the leading clan heads of the forest’s edge, Duke Marstein Genos wishes to hold a dinner party.”

“A dinner party...?”

Donda Ruu seriously furrowed his brows, while my eyes went wide.

With his usual aloof grin once more back in place, Kamyua Yoshu turned my way. “Therefore, he apparently wants you to serve your giba cooking, Asuta. He wants to show all of you his honest intentions as lord of this land by gathering in the same place as you and eating the same meat. So, what do you say?”

“The lord of Genos said he’d eat giba meat...?” The one to ask that question

hadn't been Donda Ruu, but rather his son Jiza Ruu. His already narrow eyes narrowed further still as he stared at Kamyua Yoshu.

"Yes. He said that what Genos needs now is to see their lord and the people of the forest's edge openly forming proper bonds."

"The lord of Genos, eating giba meat..." Jiza Ruu repeated, his expression not shifting in the least. Apparently that had made for quite a shock.

"What Duke Genos fears most of all is the people of the forest's edge leaving this land. For twenty years he had entrusted the reins to Cyclaeus to form bonds with you and make sure that didn't happen, so now he's left fumbling. Despite his smile, I think on the inside his mind is desperately racing to find a way to settle things smoothly."

"In that case, why did he not make a move before things got this bad? You and Melfried must have had plenty to tell him about how Cyclaeus was suspected of serious crimes, right?" Donda Ruu asked, but Kamyua Yoshu shook his head.

"No matter how much we suspected him, we didn't have any proof. He decided that if both Cyclaeus and the people of the forest's edge insisted they were right, then he would wait till the very last moment possible to make a move, hoping that one side would manage to prevail before it came to that. I tried telling him that just leaving things be meant allowing the fangs of Cyclaeus's ambitions to close in on your throats, but he just laughed and said in that case, you would have to fight with everything you had."

"Hmph... He certainly sounds like a big talker."

"Yeah. Even I don't have a good grasp on just how capable that man really is. So I'd say your decision to take your time judging that for yourselves is definitely the right one, Donda Ruu," Kamyua Yoshu said with a grin. "By the time I managed to finally drag him out, my work was mostly done. Now all I have to do is run this way and that for the shorthanded Duke Genos and Melfried while keeping a careful eye on where things are heading. I really do hope you people of the forest's edge can form proper ties with Genos... Anyway, I'll come visit again in the future to hear your official reply, so let the other leading clan heads know, all right?"

After that, another five days passed, and we reached the twenty-fourth of the white month.

On that day we once again loaded plenty of meals into our wagon and headed for the post town. Our group was made up of me and Reina Ruu, plus Ai Fa, Ludo and Shin Ruu, and three other hunters as our guards.

Since we were ultimately just delivering the meals and fresh meat to the inns and then purchasing fresh vegetables, there was no real need for me and Reina Ruu to come along. But I wanted to see the state of the post town with my own two eyes, and Gazraan Rutim also recommended that we keep on forging bonds with the townsfolk as we had been.

We wanted to know just what everyone from the post town thought in regards to Marstein's commands, and also tell them what the people of the forest's edge were thinking. And so the conclusion was that sure enough, I was the one best suited to act as that information pipeline.

At any rate, though, we ended up carrying out our work in the post town again on that day.

After delivering sixty meals of giba sauté arrabbiata and enough fresh meat for another twenty meals to The Sledgehammer, and seventy meals of meat and chatchi stew plus meat for thirty to The Great Southern Tree, we headed to Dora's shop.

There was still some time left until the sun would hit its peak, so Yang's stall wasn't yet open. However, the number of stalls serving colorful poitan seemed to be creeping upward day by day. And I could smell the sweet aroma of milk fat wafting through the air here and there as we walked along too.

It sure seems like Kamyua and Polarth's plan is progressing smoothly.

At this point, Cyclaeus and Ciluel were awaiting an inescapable judgment. But Kamyua Yoshu explained that this plot to scale up the demand for poitan was still essential to prevent other nobles from interfering.

"Ultimately, the ones who rule over a land are the local nobles. And since Cyclaeus's fortune and authority were swelling to the point of equaling that of

Duke Genos, it's important to remove any potential obstacles that could get in our way," Kamyua Yoshu had said on the day after the meeting. "For example, even though we successfully arrested Cyclaeus and Ciluel, if the Daleim and Saturas houses were bribed, we may not be able to expect a fair trial. After all, the legal officers and interrogators all come from noble houses. If things went poorly, it could even end in a confrontation between the ducal house of Genos and the houses of the three counts."

But if everything kept on going according to plan and poitan became a staple food in Genos, the profitability of fuwano would drop drastically and the house of Turan would lose a great deal of power in the not-so-distant future. And if that happened, no one with connections to the Daleim or Saturas houses would have to hesitate over fear of reprisal.

Then, Lefreya would inherit the house at the age of just ten, complete with declining finances and the previous head having been convicted as a criminal. On top of that, it would be an inheritance in name only, with her guardian holding all the actual authority.

I couldn't help but think of the old saying that the sins of a parent will be visited upon their children. Both the house of Turan and the Suun clan had lost their prosperity due to the actions of the men who once led them. It would certainly be nice if that chain of negativity could be severed here and now, but all I could do was pray for things to go that well.

"Hey there, Asuta! Glad to see you looking well again today!"

After we finished heading around to the inns, we stopped by Dora's vegetable stall, where he greeted us with a wide grin. For these past few days, he'd looked truly, overwhelmingly joyful.

When I mentioned it to him, he said, "That's true. Those wicked nobles have been arrested, and now it looks like the people of the forest's edge have a peaceful future ahead of them, right? I can't imagine any news that would make me happier!"

Cyclaeus and Ciluel's trials hadn't even started yet, and we still had no clue as to the whereabouts of the scoundrels serving under them. While for the moment everything was peaceful, the people of the forest's edge couldn't

exactly go taking it easy just yet.

Even so, Dora just kept happily smiling.

“I’d certainly like to be able to eat giba burgers again as soon as possible. But just seeing you all looking well is plenty enough for me,” he said with a bashful grin, scratching his head through the turban-like white cloth wrapped around his head. “When you do reopen for business, though, make sure to let me know as soon as possible. Lately my poitan are getting bought up as soon as they’re ready, so it’s real difficult keeping up my stock. Just like the notice from Lord Daleim told us to do, though, we’ve been steadily increasing the amount of land used for them. It’ll still be some time before we can harvest the new crops, though.”

“I see. That sounds like it could make you both hopeful and frustrated.”

At any rate, Dora’s smile certainly gave me strength.

But then I noticed his daughter wearing an uncharacteristically gloomy expression, so I went, “Huh?” with a tilt of my head. “What the matter, Tara? Does your stomach hurt or something?”

Her dark brown hair swayed when she shook her head in response. Looking closer, she actually seemed more cranky than gloomy.

“Ah, I scolded her a bit, so she’s angry at me. It’s nothing for you to worry about, Asuta.”

“Ooh, that’s unusual. What in the world happened?”

“Well, you see... Apparently yesterday she ran into that Leito boy at the roadside. And then, well...”

I had no idea what he was getting at.

But then, Tara stared up at me with her big eyes the same shade as her hair.

“Leito and Mister Kamyua are always making trips to the settlement at the forest’s edge, right? And he said you let them eat your cooking too.”

“Ah, right, I had them do a bit of taste testing before when I was doing some cooking experiments. And...?”

“I wanted to eat your cooking too, and I wanted to come play at your house,” Tara replied, her eyes starting to tear up.

I was left bewildered, while Dora sighed and said, “You’re asking for a lot, you know. Asuta will be starting up his stalls again soon enough, so just hold on till then.”

“You’ve got it nice, Papa... You get to stay in the post town every day and eat Asuta’s cooking.”

“You’re being silly, I—” her father started, and then he awkwardly held his tongue.

Despite the fact that Dora lived on the Daleim plantations not far from the post town, he was apparently visiting dining halls each night in a campaign designed to wipe away the bad reputation surrounding the people of the forest’s edge.

With that in mind, he must have been heading to inns other than The Sledgehammer and The Great Southern Tree, because neither of them had many western customers, which meant he wouldn’t have been eating my cooking. But he must not have explained things to Tara in that much detail.

At any rate, though, I couldn’t stand the thought that I had been the cause of a rift forming between this incredibly close father-daughter pair. And so, I racked my brain to try to find the words needed to calm the young girl down.

“Umm, Tara, you see... I’m actually staying at the Ruu settlement right now, and I haven’t been home in over ten days.”

“Huh? Really?”

“Yeah. Those bad nobles have been arrested, but their buddies are still out there. We even have some soldiers from Genos Castle protecting the Ruu settlement during the day. Leito’s only able to come visit the forest’s edge because Kamyua is with him.”

“I see...” Tara murmured, her expression filled with concern. And so, I shot her a smile.

“But eventually, all those bad people will be caught. And if the people of the

forest's edge and townsfolk start getting along, I'm sure you'll be able to come play at the settlement. So do you think you can wait till then?"

"You'll let me eat your food too?"

"Yeah. When that day comes, I'll pull out all the stops and make you a really delicious meal."

That was finally enough to earn a happy smile from Tara.

"Before that though, we've got to reopen the stalls for business. If I manage to develop a new dish, could I count on you for taste testing?"

"Yeah!"

Tara looked like a puppy happily wagging her tail, and as Dora watched her he gave a strained smile.

"She really does get stubborn when it comes to your cooking, Asuta... Sorry for the trouble."

"Ah, it was nothing."

After all, you two have already done so much for me... I thought as I smiled back at Dora.

At that point Ai Fa urged, "Time is passing, you know," and so I finished up my shopping in a hurry.

As we started heading back down the road afterward, passersby kept calling out to us here and there. The majority of them were definitely southerners, but about twenty percent or so were westerners. As for what they were saying, it was a mix of simple greetings and questions like, "When are you going to reopen the stalls?" Since easterners weren't very talkative, they just gave silent bows or shot us urgent looks.

Regarding the incident involving Cyclaeus, the majority of the details had already been delivered throughout the post town by command of Duke Marstein Genos.

The house of Turan's head, Cyclaeus, and the militia leader, Ciluel, had conspired with the former leading clan head of the forest's edge, Zattsu Suun, and were alleged to have committed countless crimes. And now, they were

being held awaiting a trial. Additionally, Zattsu Suun's successor Zuuro Suun had ordered dozens of his relatives to plunder the fruits of Morga, and was being held in Genos Castle for his crimes. The spread of that news had done quite a bit to clear away the disquieting air lingering about the post town.

It was now clear that Count Turan had been the one to protect any people of the forest's edge—or rather any members of the Suun clan—who had committed wrongdoing around town. But in the future, if a person of the forest's edge committed a crime, that fact wouldn't be unjustly swept under the rug. The last of the criminals, Zuuro Suun, would also soon be judged. And since that news was delivered under the name of Duke Genos, it must have made for quite a shock for the townsfolk. Then perhaps if news of the conciliatory dinner party between Duke Genos and the leading clan heads of the forest's edge also got out, in addition to being even more of a shock, it could show the fact that both sides were trying to put aside past grudges and form fresh bonds with one another.

"I can't help but be more than a little displeased at you getting dragged out again as a result, though..." Ai Fa whispered into my ears as she held Gilulu's reins while we walked down the road.

The leading clan heads had given their approval to Marstein's general proposal for the dinner party and Lefreya's accession to her father's rank.

Currently the date and who all would attend was still being hashed out, but it had already been decided that it would be held in the castle town and that I would act as a chef. In the near future, news of those arrangements would likely be spread all throughout the land of Genos, along with the decision that Lefreya would inherit Cyclaeus's rank.

So in all likelihood, Duke Genos is probably also trying to use the dinner party to divert the populace's attention.

Lefreya's accession was the one point discussed that would earn him antagonism from his people.

Cyclaeus's daughter had once kidnapped Asuta of the forest's edge, but now her crimes were being pardoned and she was being granted her father's rank. Even with the explanation that it was being done to take the rank of count away

from Cyclaeus, who had committed far worse crimes, it still seemed like an order that was sure to strengthen animosity toward nobles.

But the sensational news that Duke Genos would eat giba meat could help stifle that bad impression.

I couldn't help but think that way, and Gazraan Rutim had apparently arrived separately at the same conclusion. Thanks to that, we brought it up with the leading clan heads, and they decided to accept Marstein's proposal.

The three leading clan heads seemed like they were pretty much thinking, "Let's see what you've got." Just how would the lord of their land, Duke Marstein Genos, bring the situation under control? Perhaps they were using this as a test, silently keeping an eye out to see whether the people of the forest's edge should continue offering up their swords in service of that graceful yet jovial noble.

"Well, it's not like Duke Genos would go stabbing us in the back at this point. If he did, he'd be declaring to all of Genos that he's even worse than Cyclaeus," I replied, but the displeased expression didn't vanish from Ai Fa's face.

"Hmm... But I don't like how the dinner is being held in the castle town. If he sincerely wishes to eat giba meat, then shouldn't he bring himself here to the settlement at the forest's edge?"

"Yeah, but, well, we're talking about a noble here, so there's no helping that."

It seemed downright impossible to imagine the lord of such a large town venturing out to a dangerous place like the settlement at the forest's edge, where giba prowled about. Plus, I had also heard that the Genos side would be preparing a chef for the dinner party too.

It was a chance for the nobles of Genos and the people of the forest's edge to share their cuisine and open up to one another, deepening their friendships. That was the crux of Marstein's proposal. And we couldn't exactly go summoning a chef from the castle town out here and make them cook on nothing but a stone stove. There was no way they'd be able to show their full skill like that.

"At any rate, it's a point of pride to be invited to man the stove for such an

important dinner party, right?" I threw out there, only for Ai Fa to lean in close with a scary face.

"It is, but I still don't like it."

Honestly, I was feeling much the same.

However, this was a critical turning point for forging a bond between Genos and the people of the forest's edge. And I really did feel unabashedly proud to have been chosen to cook for the event. Thanks to that, I intended to give the task my absolute all.

"Now then, what should we go with?"

In the early afternoon on the same day, the hunters had headed out to the forest while I was getting in my cooking practice.

Currently Reina, Sheera, and Rimee Ruu were all gathered in the kitchen.

At the Ruu settlement, three women were assigned to the work in the post town while the others stayed behind to take care of their daily chores. But with us taking a break from working the stalls, it was decided that the three of them could use the free time they now had in the afternoon for cooking practice.

As they would continue working in the post town from here on out, Reina and Sheera Ruu were the fixed members of this group, while the other sisters of the main house took turns in the remaining spot depending on the day.

And starting today, we were to begin specifically preparing for the dinner party.

"You have to prepare a lot of different dishes for a dinner party, don't you?" Reina Ruu said, tilting her head adorably as she mulled it over.

Apparently when nobles had a dinner party, the custom was for there to always be a multi-course meal served. You started with the appetizer and soup, followed by a fuwano dish, vegetable dish, and meat dish, and then ended with a dessert. And so, we would need to prepare six dishes in total.

"Well, there's no need to stick to the customs of the castle town. Just make sure to use giba for the meat dish. Everything else, you can do as you please," Kamyua Yoshu had instructed us, but there was also no reason to go against

those customs either. Marstein had proposed the idea in order to deepen the friendship between our groups, and I wanted to make a sincere effort to respond to his request.

“At any rate, what’s key here is the meat dish using giba. I was thinking of locking that down first and then deciding on the rest of the lineup,” I said, my gaze falling to the wooden plate atop the work station.

There was a white powder piled high atop the plate, and it wasn’t either fuwano or poitan. No, it was a new ingredient that I had developed over these past several days.

“And if possible I’d like to use this too, but what do you think? The people of the forest’s edge have had a favorable reception of the giba cutlets, and the nobles seemed to like my fried kimyuus, so if I can make something comparable with this new ingredient, how about making that the main dish?”

“A dish comparable to giba cutlets?” Reina Ruu stated, her eyes narrowing as she looked spellbound. “If you can create a dish like that so easily, I think I’ll be feeling the gulf between your skill and mine quite keenly.” Despite her words, Reina Ruu had broken out in an incredibly joyful smile.

And next to her, Rimee Ruu was poking at the powder atop the plate. “So this powder’s made from chatchi, right? How in the world did you get it like this?”

“Well, this is what you end up with when you dry out a broth made from chatchi.”

First I had to finely dice up the potato-like chatchi, then wrap it in a thin cloth and submerge it in a pot filled with water. Next, I carefully rubbed it to extract a chatchi broth. After leaving the broth to sit for a while, a starch-like substance settled at the bottom. Once that was done, I separated it into several portions and removed the clear layer of liquid that rose to the top, and finally I took the remaining residue and let it dry out.

If chatchi really were built the same as potatoes, the ingredient I had made would be akin to potato starch. Now that I had encountered fuwano flour, which was closer to wheat flour than poitan was, I really did want a suitable substitute for potato starch too.

“I figure if I use this I can make a fried dish that’s lighter on the oil than giba cutlets. So how about we try that out first?”

I had gone through the effort of figuring out how to prepare this chatchi starch for the sole purpose of trying to make something like tatsuta age, where you deep-fried meat that was breaded with potato starch rather than wheat flour.

Of course, there were a multitude of other uses for potato starch besides fried foods. But since the people of the forest’s edge were even fonder of fried dishes than I had ever expected, I wanted to expand the number of variations I could offer on the idea.

Tatsuta age didn’t need any egg and could be made with the coating somewhat on the thin side, so I figured it would be at least a bit healthier than the giba cutlets. Plus, it would be pretty difficult for clans that weren’t quite as well off as the Ruu to get a hold of new ingredients like fuwano or eggs. And so I figured this dish would be easy to introduce for folks in that situation.

“For the time being, let’s try making a sample to test out. Reina Ruu, could I have you heat up some giba lard?”

“Right, understood.”

“I already let the meat marinate while we were chopping wood. The marinade was made with myamuu, fruit wine, and tau oil, and I let it sit for around the same amount of time as the myamuu giba. I also rubbed salt and pico leaves into it before letting it soak, so now I just have to sprinkle chatchi starch over it and fry it up the same as the giba cutlets.”

“I see. In that case, you can adjust the flavor by changing the ingredients in the marinade and how long you let it soak, right?”

“Right. It’s the same as the myamuu giba on that front,” I replied, stealing a peek over at Sheera Ruu’s expression.

Ever since Darmu Ruu had returned, Sheera Ruu had started looking depressed an awful lot of the time, but unsurprisingly her expression remained resolute while practicing cooking.

“Hey Asuta, can I still not help with frying?” Rimee Ruu asked as Reina Ruu

heated up the lard. I just couldn't bring myself to let an eight-year-old child like her help with something as dangerous as cooking fried foods.

"Well, to be honest I'd probably feel a lot more comfortable trusting you with it than Vina or Lala Ruu, but still... When you heat it up, oil gets really dangerous. If any splashes up and lands on you, it could leave behind a scar that will never go away."

"I see..." Rimee Ruu replied, sadly staring at the ground. Just like with Tara, it made for a real heartrending expression.

"What's the matter? Right now I can only have Reina and Sheera Ruu assist with fried foods, and maybe Mia Lea Ruu at most. I don't think it's anything for you to worry yourself over."

"Yeah... But you still can't bring me along, right...?"

"Huh? Do you mean to the dinner party in the castle town?"

"Yeah. Reina and Sheera Ruu are going to help you out, aren't they?"

It still hadn't been determined just how many people would be attending the dinner party. But the leading clan heads of the forest's edge had decided their party would include six participants, and the noble side wouldn't have less than that, so we would certainly have to prepare enough food for more than a dozen at the very least.

Since the noble side would also be preparing food, we would only need to prepare half as much for each person, but since we were talking six different courses it would still be quite a lot. Thanks to that, we decided Reina and Sheera Ruu would also come along as assistants, and depending on the circumstances we were also ready to bring on additional hands.

"Hmm, I'm not sure... They would be just about the best I could hope for in terms of cooking skills, but we're talking about the castle town here..."

"The bad nobles were all arrested though, weren't they? And Papa Donda and everyone are heading to the castle town to make up with the people there, aren't they?"

"Rimee, dad will be the one to decide who's going, so you shouldn't bother

Asuta like that,” Reina Ruu chimed in.

“Right...” Rimee Ruu answered, hanging her head again.

It was certainly true enough that this was no place for me to go carelessly interjecting. And so, I picked up the giba sirloin now coated in white chatchi starch and shot Rimee Ruu a smile.

“Why don’t you try talking to Donda Ruu when he gets back? You can wait till you hear what he has to say before getting all down, right?”

“Yeah,” Rimee Ruu said with a grin, seemingly trying to pick herself up too.

After seeing that innocent smile, I turned my attention to the pot.

“Now then, how is the lard looking?”

“I think it should be just about ready,” Reina Ruu replied, pointing toward the wooden skewer in the lard. Sure enough, the right size of bubbles were now springing up around the skewer’s tip.

Reina Ruu also went ahead and tossed just a pinch of chatchi starch into the lard. If it dropped to the bottom, that would mean the lard was at a medium temperature, while it would be at a high temperature instead if it floated. And with a crackle, the chatchi starch soon popped up to the top.

Since nothing unexpected had occurred as a result of using chatchi rather than potatoes, I went ahead and breathed a sigh of relief.

“All right, looks like I can leave this up to you. Make sure to be careful though, okay?”

“Of course,” Reina Ruu said with a nervous look as she accepted the giba meat. Since there weren’t that many opportunities to prepare fried food, I wanted to let Reina and Sheera Ruu have the experience whenever possible.

Reina Ruu gently added the giba meat into the pot, taking care so that the oil wouldn’t splatter up. Instantly there was a nice, lively crackling sound, and Rimee Ruu’s eyes sparkled as she went “Ooh!” from a short distance away, where she had retreated.



A few minutes later, the coating turned a golden brown, completing the dish. And as Reina Ruu lifted it up with grigee chopsticks, her eyes went wide. “Huh? The coating looks like it’s expanded a bit. Did I mess up somehow?”

“No, the chatchi starch just absorbed some oil and air. I believe that should give it a different texture than the giba cutlets.”

In actuality, I couldn’t really say whether cutlets or tatsuta age were healthier. On top of that, I had no way of knowing whether or not such oil intake was good or bad for the people of the forest’s edge.

However, way back when I made the hamburger steak, Gazraan Rutim said that they would be the ones to determine their own path. And if anyone indulged in the taste to the point of harming their health, then that was their own fault.

I didn’t want to lean too heavily on those words, but I also couldn’t hold back my desire to bring the people of the forest’s edge joy through all sorts of dishes. Was my cooking medicine or a poison? Though I would keep being cautious with that question in mind, I still wanted everyone to eat the food I made. And ever since I heard of how Cyclaeus made himself sick through his luxurious dining, those feelings had only grown stronger in me.

“Now then, the excess oil should have mostly dripped off by now, right?”

Using the chopsticks, I moved the fried meat over to my cutting board and chopped it into four equal parts.

There didn’t seem to be any issues with how it had been cooked through, as the meat was a beautiful ivory-white.

“All right, now how about we give it a taste test?”

“Yay!” Rimee Ruu excitedly proclaimed, snatching up a piece of tatsuta age before anyone else. Without delay, she tossed it into her mouth and chewed it a bit... And then her little face melted into a smile. Yup, she looked absolutely enraptured.

Reina and Sheera Ruu were both looking pretty happy too. Sheera Ruu in particular had placed a hand to one cheek and let out a childish “Mmm!” which

was shockingly adorable.

“This is really delicious... I think I may like it even better than giba cutlets.”

“I would say they’re both equally tasty.”

“Umm, umm... I like them both the same too!”

Apparently all three of them approved of it at least as much as the giba cutlets.

And as I let the joy from their smiles wash over me, I also went ahead and brought my portion to my mouth.

Unlike the crunchiness of the cutlet coating, this one had a more crisp texture. And underneath that thin crust was the texture of the giba meat, filled with unbelievably delicious flavor.

The lard had only amplified the taste of the meat further, and it spread throughout my mouth alongside the flavor of the myamuu and fruit wine in perfect harmony. Despite the fact that they were both fried dishes, this really was a completely different taste than the giba cutlets.

Personally, I had no complaints about how it had turned out. Once I fine-tuned the seasonings and carefully examined the best cut of meat to use and how to shape it, I couldn’t see having any issues offering it up at any occasion.

“All right, I guess let’s settle on this as the main dish,” I declared, and everyone nodded back with a grin.

4

Several hours had passed now since our visitors had arrived at the Ruu settlement.

We had finished taste-testing the tatsuta age and briefly discussed what would be good for the other dishes, so we were about to get started preparing tonight’s dinner. But that was when we received some news in the kitchen.

“Hey Jeeda. What’s up?”

The first one to arrive was Jeeda. Shockingly, he had been staying in the Ruu

settlement for five days now, and had been helping Ryada Ruu and everyone with guard duty.

“Kamyua Yoshu’s group is here again. He said they want to talk to you Asuta, but will you see them?”

“Kamyua? Of course. Actually, I’m surprised he didn’t just come barging on in...”

“Well, he’s brought some troublesome guests along with him. If you won’t see them, they’ll turn around and leave, but they want to hear your answer first,” Jeeda calmly and expressionlessly stated. However, his yellow eyes flickered with restless energy. “He’s accompanied by Cyclaeus’s daughter and her servant from Sym. Apparently Kamyua Yoshu got the lord of Genos’s permission to bring them here to this settlement. Will you see them?”

Naturally, I replied in utter shock, “H-He brought along Lefreya and Sanjura? Kamyua did? But why?”

“I’ve got no idea. If you want to know why, then ask the man himself.”

If he went so far as to get Marstein’s approval, then I really didn’t have any choice but to meet with them. Still, Kamyua Yoshu and Lefreya really made for a difficult pair to picture together.

“We can’t exactly go turning them away without hearing what they have to say. Reina Ruu, I’m stepping out for a bit, so take care of things here, all right?”

“Right. Take care, Asuta,” Reina Ruu replied with a nod and a concerned look, and then I exited the kitchen along with Jeeda.

“That guy from Sym doesn’t have a blade. So as long as Kamyua Yoshu doesn’t betray us, there’s nothing to worry about,” Jeeda said as we walked along.

Jeeda was still just fourteen, but he was ten centimeters shorter than I was. And his shoulder that had been fractured by Sanjura must not have healed completely just yet. But in spite of all that, he apparently had just as much strength as the hunters of the forest’s edge stored up in his small frame.

“Huh? Ai Fa?”

After we advanced a bit, I spied my clan head standing in front of the main

building of the house. She had been tying Gilulu's reins to a tree branch, and now she stared back at me with a steady light in her blue eyes.

"I finished up my giba hunting and returned a moment ago... And it seems I arrived just in time."

"So you're back too, huh? In that case, we're even more secure than I thought," Jeeda stated.

Ai Fa replied "Indeed," with a firm nod.

And as we continued further on, we soon found a number of men already gathered at the far edge of the Ruu settlement's plaza. Ryada Ruu and Mida were both there, as were a number of boys under the age of thirteen who weren't yet qualified to be hunters.

Standing off against them was quite the imposing group. There were three soldiers clad in white armor, Kamyua Yoshu, and two figures hidden under hooded cloaks, one large and one small. They must have been Lefreya and Sanjura. And outside of the plaza, I could see the boxed carriage they had apparently ridden here in and the tolos that pulled it.

"Hey there Asuta. Sorry for the surprise, but just like I had Jeeda tell you, I brought them here with Duke Genos's approval. If you don't mind, could you take a bit of time to hear what they have to say?" Kamyua Yoshu asked with a relaxed grin. That smile grew a bit strained in the face of Ai Fa and Jeeda keeping an extremely close watch on him, though. "Let me just say, I'm only here as a bodyguard at Duke Genos's request. They're standing here of their own will, and I had nothing to do with it whatsoever."

I gave a nod, and then with Ai Fa's permission I moved over toward them.

And then, the larger figure somewhat awkwardly pulled down his hood.

"It has been some time, Asuta. You have my thanks, for agreeing to talk, to us..."

This was my first time seeing Sanjura in roughly half a month.

His hair was long and a pale chestnut color, while his eyes were reddish brown. And though his skin was dark, he was ultimately a westerner with the

appearance of an easterner. And that gentle smile of his hadn't changed at all...

"I had heard the servants of Count Turan's house were all moved elsewhere, so how is it that you are able to openly remain at your mistress's side?" Ai Fa harshly questioned, but Sanjura kept the same gentle grin as he turned her way.

"I am not a servant, of Count Turan's house. Cyclaeus may have hired me with coins, but I am a wanderer, with no home. I have paid for my crimes, and am now a free man."

"That may be so, but after your treachery I cannot accept the idea of someone like you staying near your mistress."

Ultimately, it was Kamyua Yoshu who replied to Ai Fa's doubts.

"Duke Genos had also weighed in on that matter and decided to permit it. Actually, his thinking was that since he was already a free man, it felt safer to keep him under watch rather than releasing him to the winds, so he was given special permission to stay with Lady Lefreya."

"But that's..."

"Well, it seems like this man is quite skilled with a blade, so we're looking into the various places he traveled to under Cyclaeus's command. As part of that, Melfried dug deep into his background, but there wasn't any proof that Sanjura here was a criminal. And so we didn't have any reason to hold him longer, which actually makes the opportunity to keep him around where we can see him real convenient."

Had Duke Genos also heard that Cyclaeus's blood might also flow through Sanjura's veins?

At any rate, I could see the logic behind wanting to keep him under watch instead of setting him loose. So, though Ai Fa was looking real displeased as she held her tongue, I decided to start talking with Sanjura.

"It really has been a while, hasn't it? Still, what business could you have with us at this point?"

"I am nothing but, an escort. Lefreya is the one, who wants to talk."

With that, the smaller figure's slender fingers reached up and pulled back her

hood.

She had chestnut-brown hair just like Sanjura's which reached down to around her chest, reddish-brown eyes with a firm light in them, and a dainty figure. Yup, that was the only official child of Count Cyclaeus Turan, Lefreya.

Her skin was an ivory color that looked untouched by the sun, her facial features were all distinct, and she wore the same tough expression and haughty gaze that I remembered. She didn't have on any accessories, and the white dress she wore under her cloak wasn't especially showy, but it still felt incredibly out of place to see this young girl who was so clearly a noble standing here in the settlement at the forest's edge.

"Asuta of the Fa clan, I have come all the way to a place such as this because I have a request I wish to make of you," Lefreya stated in a high-pitched tone with a slight lisp.

Instantly, Ai Fa interjected, "Hey," with a light glaring in her eyes. "You certainly are acting high and mighty, considering you haven't even apologized yet. You did some truly despicable things when you had Asuta kidnapped, young noble girl."

"You are the woman from the forest's edge who came to retrieve Asuta, claiming to be the daughter of a merchant group's leader, aren't you? I believe your name was Ai Fa of the Fa clan, correct?" Lefreya asked, shooting Ai Fa a look like she found this all quite bothersome. "I have already been judged for my crimes. The fact that my six months of confinement were shortened to just a few days was not by my will. And yet you still seek an apology despite the fact that I have already atoned?"

"You didn't utter even a single word of apology to Asuta on that night. How crass of you, to come here as if you don't feel regret for your actions."

"Hmm? If you say we cannot talk until I have apologized for my rudeness, then I shall do so as many times as it takes," Lefreya stated, bringing together her hands in front of her chest and bowing her head to me. "Asuta of the Fa clan, I failed to listen to your wishes to return home, and robbed you of your freedom for my own callous reasons. I beg your forgiveness for the countless discourtesies I have shown you. Now, was that enough to satisfy you?"

With an even more dangerous glare in her eyes, Ai Fa frowned.

And then, letting out a little “Hmph,” Lefreya brushed away her long hair that had fallen in front of her face.

Her one and only family member, her father, had been arrested for his crimes and was awaiting trial. Just what must she be feeling over that harsh reality? At the very least, I certainly couldn’t tell at all from her actions.

“We must return by the fifth hour. There is no time to spare, so allow me to get to the matter at hand... Asuta of the Fa clan, you were invited to act as a chef for the dinner party proposed by Duke Genos, correct?”

“Yup, that’s right,” I replied, wondering all the while if it was okay to be speaking so casually to someone who would soon be a countess.

Being more than a head shorter than me, Lefreya glared up at my face.

“I have also been invited to that dinner party. Actually, I should say that it is to be held at my manor.”

“Huh? Is that true, Kamyua?” I asked.

The aloof bodyguard replied, “Yeah,” with a nod. “Duke Genos’s goal is to patch things up with the people of the forest’s edge. With that in mind, he believes it best to have Lady Lefreya also attend, as you have a troubled past with her.”

“I mean, maybe we do, but still... It’s being held at the Turan manor?”

“Right. It requires all sorts of complex preparations and formalities to invite anyone who isn’t a noble to the castle of Genos, so apparently that led to the current decision. His thinking seems to be that if the house of Turan twisted the bonds between you, then their home is the perfect place for reconciliation. Perhaps fortunately, from what I’m told, the Turan manor’s kitchens are every bit as fine as the ones in the castle.”

Well, if the guards working for the house of Turan were all cleaned out and members of the ducal guard kept watch instead, then the location didn’t really matter. And if that was what Marstein decided, then we had no choice but to go along with it.

“When I heard about this event, a single thought came to me... Asuta of the Fa clan, would it be possible to allow my father to also partake in that food?”

“Huh?!” I shouted in shock, unable to restrain my voice.

Ai Fa, meanwhile, narrowed her eyes in astonishment.

“Wh-What are you talking about? You couldn’t possibly be asking to have your father attend the dinner party, are you?”

“Of course not. Unlike myself, my father is awaiting trial. There is no way such a man could ever be invited to an event of this kind.”

“Th-Then what are you...?”

“My father has sought to consume every dish imaginable in this world. That was precisely why he purchased so many ingredients from Sym and Jagar and summoned a great many chefs to serve him,” Lefreya stated, not showing the slightest hint of guilt or shame. “But I do not believe he has ever eaten cooking from overseas. His trial is sure to result in a sentence of either death or confinement for life, so this is the final chance for him to eat your cooking. As his daughter, it is only natural that I wish to grant him this final parting gift, is it not...?”

“You can wish for whatever you please, but I cannot see a single reason for us to fulfill that request,” Ai Fa replied in a low voice.

With an irritated look, Lefreya turned her way.

“I’m talking to Asuta of the Fa clan, you know. Or do I need to obtain your permission first as his clan head in order to make a request of him?”

“That’s right. And I would say you need the permission of the leading clan heads of the forest’s edge before you talk to me,” Ai Fa replied in an unsparing tone. “Cyclaeus, his younger brother Ciluel, and the former leading clan head Zattsu Suun had committed countless crimes over the course of many years. In order to amass power and fortune, they took the lives of a great many innocents. I cannot imagine it proper to show mercy to such criminals.”

“But his trial has yet to begin, correct? He may be a criminal, but the weight of his crimes has not been measured. That is why I believe this to be his final

chance,” Lefreya responded, her voice starting to sound unusually calm. “Once he is judged, even if he manages to avoid death, he will spend the rest of his life imprisoned and eating nothing but crude meals. To someone who had no interest in anything but gourmet cooking such as my father, that would be no different than a death sentence. So before it is firmly established that my father is in fact a criminal, I wish to give him something akin to a final meal.”

None of us had any response to that.

“Of course, in the current state of affairs, I am not free to handle so much as a single coin as I please. As such, I cannot offer you fitting payment. However...” Lefreya paused, her gaze turning toward the member of the ducal guard standing at her side. “Could I ask to borrow that dagger at your hip?”

The armored man’s expression didn’t so much as twitch.

Scratching his blond head, Kamyua Yoshu approached from the other side.

“If you just want a dagger, then I can loan you one. But I can’t let you go and commit suicide, so if you make any strange moves, I may have to get a little rough in holding you down, all right?”

“That is acceptable. I have no intention of doing anything so foolish, after all.”

Kamyua Yoshu nodded, and then pulled a knife out of the inside of his cloak like magic. Then, as he held the blade in his hand he turned toward Sanjura.

“Sorry, but could I have you move a bit further away?”

“I am powerless. There is no strength left in me, to do anything...”

“Well, the fact that you can move naturally only a few days after a whipping is enough by itself to make you look plenty threatening to me. Your ally who got the same punishment is writhing around atop a bed, unable to so much as sleep, right?” Kamyua Yoshu said with a wicked grin, dangling the knife.

“Nothing’s more frightening than an injured beast. I may not be a hunter, but even I know that much. And I don’t want to stain the settlement at the forest’s edge with a criminal’s blood, so please move just a little bit away from your mistress.”

Still wearing the same faint smile, Sanjura stared at Lefreya.

She gave a small nod, and it was only then that he finally retreated. Without a moment's delay, two of the soldiers grabbed hold of his arms.

"Yup, that's about the level of caution that feels necessary. Well then, Lady Lefreya, here's the dagger."

With that, Lefreya silently accepted the blade, handing just the leather sheath back to Kamyua Yoshu.

"That certainly took a while... At any rate, since I cannot offer payment, I instead offer this up in its place."

Lefreya held the knife in an underhand grip, and then before anyone could stop her...she roughly chopped off her long chestnut-colored hair that had come down to her chest, leaving it only neck-length.

That long hair that had been so tenderly cared for gave off a golden shine in the sunlight as it scattered throughout the settlement at the forest's edge.



“I no longer have any power whatsoever. As Duke Genos ordered, I have no choice but to live out my life as a mere wooden puppet. Well, I idly accepted the life given to me by my father, so it is only natural that everything would be taken from me alongside his fall,” Lefreya dauntlessly stated, her now loose and disheveled hair in plain view. “If I am told to be a nun then a nun I shall be, and if I am told to marry some noble and have an heir, then I shall obey. I can also swear to never again bring harm to you people of the forest’s edge, but it is not as if I have the power left to do so to begin with. With all that being true, can you grant me this one final request?”

“You really want to have your dad eat my cooking that badly?”

“Correct.”

With her gaze still fixed on me, she held out her right hand to the side, still gripping the knife. Kamyua Yoshu then took it from her and solemnly placed it back in its sheath.

“Duke Genos said that he leaves everything regarding this matter up to Asuta and the leading clan heads of the forest’s edge. But he also said there is no need to show kindness to Cyclaeus, who deceived your people over the course of a great many years, and Lady Lefreya, who abducted you, Asuta.”

I turned to face Kamyua Yoshu.

He didn’t look to be especially worked up, and was just shooting me his usual aloof grin.

“However, Cyclaeus is growing weaker day by day, and it’s all he can do to force down the medicine he needs to hold back his illness. From what I’m told, he hasn’t had the willpower to eat any proper food. At this rate it doesn’t seem he’ll last until the trial, so it would be fortunate if your cooking could grant him at least a little bit of nourishment... That’s the only real positive I can see here, but the choice is ultimately yours.”

“I see...”

Right now, there were all sorts of thoughts and feelings all jumbled together inside of me. No one word could sum up what I felt toward Lefreya or Cyclaeus.

Naturally, those emotions included anger and animosity. However, I found myself feeling just as much dreary, empty sadness over the question of why they chose the path they did, instead of living lives filled with hope and compassion.

Perhaps fortunately, though, this was no decision for me to be making on my own. And so as I pushed down those emotions whirling inside of me to the depths of my guts, I turned back toward Lefreya with my face schooled to be as calm as I could manage.

“I’ll discuss it with the leading clan heads of the forest’s edge, as well as my own clan head, Ai Fa. If none of them object, then I’ll go ahead and cook for your father... That’s all I can tell you for now.”

“I see...” Lefreya replied, closing her eyes and clasping her hands together in front of her chest again. “I shall pray that you hear my request... Thank you, Asuta of the Fa clan.”



From there, the days continued rolling along.

Cyclaeus still hadn’t recovered from his illness, Ciluel was maintaining his silence, and we still had no clues as to the whereabouts of their hired goons. Time just kept slipping by, with no dramatic changes in sight. And during that period, the details of the dinner party were fleshed out.

The date would be the thirtieth of the white month.

The place, Count Turan’s manor.

And the number of participants would be thirteen. From the forest’s edge that included Donda Ruu, Gulaf Zaza, Dari Sauti, Gazraan Rutim, and the Fou and Beim clan heads. The castle town’s side included Marstein, Melfried, Lefreya, the Turan house’s guardian, and one representative each for the Saturas and Daleim houses, the latter of whom would apparently be the second son, Polarth. And then finally Welhide from the ducal house of Banarm as a witness.

I would be working the kitchen alongside Reina, Sheera, and Rimee Ruu, and then Ai Fa, Ludo and Darmu Ruu, and Rau Lea would accompany us as

bodyguards. It went without saying that those results left Rimee Ruu shouting with joy, while Dan Rutim let loose an anguished roar. As far as the Rutim clan head went, since it wasn't an emergency situation, customs stated either he or his heir would have to remain home, which led to Donda Ruu's decision.

And in the aftermath I was set to present a modest dinner to Cyclaeus, in an unofficial event behind the scenes that had the approval of both Duke Marstein Genos and the leading clan heads of the forest's edge. There was a good bit of confusion from the leading clan heads over the matter, but in the end they decided to accept it since it wouldn't cause any harm.

What ultimately decided it was likely when Donda Ruu said, "We need Cyclaeus alive in order for that other criminal Ciluel to face proper judgment. And it's just plain childish to say we won't feed Cyclaeus or his daughter our people's cooking because we don't like them, isn't it?"

Gulaf Zaza had remained firmly opposed throughout, but at that he held his tongue. And naturally, I had no objections to begin with. More importantly, Donda Ruu calling my food "our people's cooking" had me secretly trembling with pride.

Once the leading clan heads delivered their reply to the castle town, the nobles sent back further details regarding the dinner party in return. And the one to act as the messenger was, unsurprisingly, Kamyua Yoshu.

"I heard that Asuta wants to work in the small kitchen in the Turan manor that he's already thoroughly acquainted with, but we would like you to report in advance how much of any ingredients that spoil easily that you'll need, like karon milk or kimyuus eggs."

"Right, understood."

"And the cook from the Genos side will apparently be the man who previously served as the assistant head chef at the Turan manor. Is he someone you have some sort of ties to, Asuta?"

"The assistant head chef...? Ah, he's probably the one who was also preparing dinners in a separate kitchen while I was being confined in the manor. Lefreya served my cooking and his to her guests and had them compare the tastes."

“I see! Apparently the man was passionately requesting that he be allowed to cook for the dinner party. If that’s what was happening, then I can certainly understand why.”

“He *passionately* requested it? Does he have some sort of hostility or something against me or the people of the forest’s edge?”

I didn’t really know the fine details, but from what I was told when they did the comparisons, everyone always decided my dishes were tastier. But even looking at it from his point of view, that didn’t seem like something to get so furious over.

“It’s probably more a pure sense of rivalry as a chef rather than hostility. Though the chefs working there did so in search of fame and fortune, it’s not as if they swore loyalty to Cyclaeus or anything, so I don’t really think you have anything to worry about. Even now that he’s vacated that job, he just returned to the previous restaurant he worked at.”

From what I was told, the house of Turan was already in the midst of a huge reformation thanks to the skills of Lefreya’s new guardian. I had no way of knowing their precise background, but apparently despite being from a branch of the Turan bloodline, they had been quietly living out their life in a corner of the Turan land after being ostracized by Cyclaeus.

At Marstein and the guardian’s command, the militia was naturally disbanded, the chefs and servants were all sent to work at different locations, and currently only people with no ties to Cyclaeus were working at the manor. The only ones permitted to approach Cyclaeus were members of the ducal guard and the doctors treating him, and Sanjura was the only person allowed to stay by Lefreya’s side.

What in the world happened to Roy and Chiffon Chel, I wonder?

I tried asking Kamyua Yoshu about the latter’s current whereabouts, but his reply was, “I have no clue. Actually, are you talking about someone from Mahyudra? Apparently, Cyclaeus was insisting I came up with my plot in order to save his northerner slaves. It would be a real issue if other nobles got such ridiculous thoughts in their heads, so I’ve been taking extra care to keep my distance from such matters.”

“Do you hate Mahyudra, Kamyua...?” I asked without thinking.

“Of course not,” the man chuckled back. “I’ve obviously got some anger toward the folks who persecuted my mother, but don’t go thinking that means I hate Mahyudra itself or everyone from there. And if you had to ask who’s responsible, then I guess I’d ultimately have to be upset with my parents for getting together with someone from an enemy nation despite knowing the treatment that would result.”

But Kamyua Yoshu decided to keep on living a carefree life without hating anybody in the end, huh?

Naturally, I had no way of reading the truth hiding behind his grin like a Cheshire cat’s.

At any rate, the days passed by, and all the while we continued solemnly experimenting on our cooking for the dinner party.

This would be the first time those nobles would eat any giba cooking, so there was no need to come up with novel new dishes. But all of the food wouldn’t be presented at once, but rather one dish at a time, which created a need to carefully plan out each of them.

And so those days were difficult yet joyful ones, spent adapting old dishes and trying out completely new ones. After all, I intended to work my hardest on creating a meal that both the leading clan heads of the forest’s edge and the nobles of Genos would find delicious.

Then in the midst of all that cooking experimentation, I had a private talk with my clan head.

“Hey Ai Fa, I was thinking of preparing some hamburger steak before dinner. What do you think?”

Ai Fa had also made it back early on that day, and as her eyebrows twitched she moved her mouth in close to my ear.

“Why? You’re making that tatsuta age dish for the dinner party, aren’t you? I cannot see any need for you to make hamburger steak as well.”

“Yeah, but it’s been over twenty days by this point since you’ve had it, right?

Your endurance has got to be hitting its limits.”

Apparently even at that banquet that the former main Suun house attended, Ai Fa hadn't eaten any hamburger steak. And the only reason I could see for that was because the dish had been prepared by Sheera Ruu's group rather than me.

As far as the main Ruu house went, they weren't especially fond of hamburger steak. As a result, it had been pushed off till when we eventually returned to the Fa house. But at this rate, if we kept waiting till the dinner party in the castle town was over, it would ultimately end up being nearly a month that Ai Fa was unable to have the dish.

No matter how you looked at it, that was just too much to ask her to bear. And so I had made that proposal, belated as it might have been, but Ai Fa just shook her head slowly in response.

“I am not so mentally weak. Rather than paying attention to such pointless concerns, focus on carrying out your work.”

“Huh? But we still don't even know when we'll be able to return to the Fa house.”

“I'm telling you it's no concern. I'm no longer so fixated on hamburger steak by this point,” Ai Fa stated, saying something that was seriously unlike her.

I was starting to worry that she was just suppressing her seething anger with her nerves of steel or something, but she wore a perfectly composed look.

“Hmm, it's just sorta hard to believe. You love hamburger steak so much, but now you don't really care either way?”

“That isn't the case at all,” Ai Fa retorted, bringing her face in close again. “I simply thought that now that you've made me wait so long, you'll surely prepare a fantastic dinner for our return to the Fa house. And when I think of that day, I feel excited rather than worrying. So there's no need for you to concern yourself,” Ai Fa stated, staring back at me calmly.

It was a look that seemed to show complete and utter trust in me.

She sure did set the bar awful high there...

Honestly, the trial she set before me would probably take every bit as much of my skill as the dinner party in the castle town.

But at any rate, we ultimately ended up making it to the thirtieth of the white month after that without any noteworthy incidents to trouble us.

Chapter 3: Dinner Party in the Castle Town

1

At last, the day had come.

It was the thirtieth of the white month, the date when the goodwill dinner party with the nobles of Genos would be held.

Our group of chefs and guards entered the Turan manor while the sun was high in the sky. Or, in the phrasing of the castle town, the later second hour. The dinner party would be in the early afternoon, just four and a half hours later.

We passed through the castle gates in the totos carriage prepared for us by the ducal guards, just as I had done half a month ago. For a number of people in our group it was their first time visiting the castle town, and so they were unable to hide their awe at the unfamiliar sights they could glimpse through the window.

“Ooh, amazing! The city of stone really *is* made out of stone!”

“It really is something... I had never thought in even my wildest dreams that I would someday set foot in the castle town.”

Unsurprisingly the hunters guarding us wore tense expressions, but even then the look in their eyes seemed a lot calmer compared to the other day.

Then when we actually arrived at the manor, I ended up shouting in excitement all on my own. The reason was, when the ducal guards led us inside with our luggage of leather bags filled with giba meat and poitan flour and the like, we were greeted by a gorgeous woman with purple eyes and curly hair the color of honey.

“Welcome, visitors from the forest’s edge... We have been awaiting you...”

“Chiffon Chel! So you stayed here in this manor?”

“Yes... It would prove rather difficult to move someone such as myself

elsewhere. Citizens of Mahyudra are only present in the land of Genos here at the Turan manor, after all..." Chiffon Chel replied, smiling down at me with her five centimeters of additional height. "At present, I have been helping Lady Lefreya take care of herself. I truly am glad to find you doing well, Sir Asuta..."

"Yeah, right back at you."

During those days of confinement, it was Diel and Chiffon Chel who brought me at least a little relief from my anguish... And I suppose I got fairly close to Roy as we spent more and more time together too.

And the only one of them whose fate I had a real reason to worry about was Chiffon Chel, due to her position. Because of that, it brought me even more joy and relief than I had expected seeing her safe and sound again.

"Well then, allow me to guide you. This way please..."

"Huh? You don't need to take our blades?" Ludo Ruu asked while carefully observing Chiffon Chel's graceful form.

But it was a member of the ducal guard who answered, "That is correct, since you cannot carry out your duty as guards without any blades. However, we ask that you only set foot where we guide you."

"Got it," Darmu Ruu replied. He was the second son of the main Ruu house, which apparently made him the head of the guard unit. The group consisted of Ai Fa, Darmu and Ludo Ruu, and Rau Lea. Though there were only four of them, it was hard to imagine a more reassuring lineup.

"Well then, this way..."

With that, we were guided down the brick hallway by Chiffon Chel and two of the soldiers. This time, though, we were led into the right wing rather than the left. In other words, the part of the building where I was once confined.

Just where exactly were Cyclaeus and Lefreya shut away? And though I hadn't heard anyone mention them, just where had Diel and her father gone?

As I pondered such thoughts, we managed to make it to our first stop: A familiar door, the sight of which caused me to freeze in place.

"U-Um, Chiffon Chel, is this perhaps the bath hall?"

“Yes... You need to cleanse yourselves before entering the kitchen, after all...”

“So even though the owner of the manor has changed, you’re still following that custom?”

“Correct... Or at least, I was informed as such...”

When Chiffon Chel looked to one of the ducal guards, he gave a nod.

“Such steps are necessary when presenting food to such noble individuals. We members of the ducal guards will be guarding all possible entrances, so please be at ease.”

“Is that so...?”

Well, I was forced to go through this same custom every day while I was confined, so I wasn’t all that upset about it. But would everyone else be all right?

“Well then, shall I lead the ladies inside first...?”

At that, Chiffon Chel led Rimee, Reina, and Sheera Ruu through the door, with question marks floating above the girls’ heads.

It was then that Ludo Ruu called out, “Hold on a moment. What you’re saying is, that’s a place for bathing, right? Then take Ai Fa along with you too. If we take our eyes off of everyone, we’re not exactly being guards, now are we?”

“Right.”

And so, our group of men ended up just standing around aimlessly.

Actually, I was the only one standing aimlessly, as the hunters all seemed to be constantly keeping an eye on our surroundings, never letting their guards down.

Then just fifteen minutes or so later, the door swung open again... And the women all came back out, their hair damp and their cheeks lightly flushed.

Everyone looked quite comfortable somehow, and so I breathed a sigh of relief. However, Ai Fa alone seemed to have an even redder face...

As that thought ran through my head, Rimee Ruu excitedly leapt at my clan head’s chest and exclaimed, “That felt really nice, didn’t it?! I never knew you

were so ticklish though, Ai Fa...”

“That simply isn’t true! I’m just not fond of others fumbling all about my body like that!”

“Huh? That’s what I thought, so I tried to help you out, but I wasn’t good either?”

“A-Ai Fa, you cleansed yourself too?” I interjected without thinking, only to earn me an indiscriminate glare.

“Rimee Ruu kept insisting, so I simply accompanied everyone else. So you had to go through this ritual every single day while being held at this manor...?”

“W-Well... Yeah, I did.”

“That certainly sounds like an ordeal...” she muttered, suddenly looking away in a huff. That movement caused a sweet aroma to waft into my nose. Apparently that steam that used something similar to mugwort wasn’t enough to wipe away the giba summoning fruit scent. In fact, the heat and dampness only seemed to cause it to overwhelm my sense of smell even more.

“Well then, Sir Asuta, it is your turn...”

“Ah, r-right...”

As I wondered what would be done in terms of guarding me now, I looked around, and my eyes met with Ludo Ruu’s.

“It’s a pain, but I’ll go with you. Darmu, you take care of that runt Rimee and everybody.”

“Right.”

As everybody else saw us off, Ludo Ruu and I walked up to the door. Chiffon Chel then moved to step through first, but in a fluster I called out, “Um...! I haven’t forgotten how to bathe myself here, so I don’t need your assistance.”

“Ah, yes... My apologies...” Chiffon Chel giggled.

On the day I was kidnapped and taken here to the Turan manor, I was cleaned head to toe by Chiffon Chel regardless of my protests. From the second day onward I adamantly refused, but the image of her graceful nude form amidst

the steam still clung to the back of my mind.

And so as I secretly prayed she wouldn't go saying anything unfortunate while I was away, I slipped through the antechamber along with Ludo Ruu and entered the steam-filled bath hall.

"Whoa, what's going on?! It's all white!"

"Yeah, I was really surprised at first too."

At any rate, I wanted to be done with it as soon as possible, so I swiftly took off my clothes and placed them into a woven basket.

And then, I scrubbed every last bit of my body with something like a bamboo spatula. And it really did take some scrubbing to get clean, as unfortunately there weren't any bathtubs here in this hall. And just as I started thinking how it'd be nice to really take my time soaking in a tub, Ludo Ruu chimed in, his clothing clinging to his chest with sweat.

"This sure is seeming like a real anticlimax, isn't it? Looks like this lord of Genos doesn't have any secret plots or anything. He really does just want to form ties with us people of the forest's edge."

"Yeah, but that's a good thing, isn't it?"

"Of course it is, but still... I mean, he just kept on feigning ignorance this whole time, only to pull this once Cyclaeus and Ciluel's crimes got exposed. It just doesn't feel right to me."

That was probably down to how Marstein's actions felt like a lizard sacrificing its own tail.

Ever since Cyclaeus's downfall, Marstein had fully admitted the fault from his side and seemed to be striving as hard as he could to fix the situation. But the one who set the stage for all this was, of course, Kamyua Yoshu.

If that aloof bodyguard hadn't located Barthia to act as a witness and pulled the ducal house of Banarm into the proceedings, who knows how things would've ended up. The people of the forest's edge surely wouldn't have been able to expose those crimes on their own... And that would have led to them turning their backs on Genos.

Just how exactly would Marstein have reacted to such a situation? Maybe he would have even cast aside the people of the forest's edge instead. Such concerns were likely exactly why the leading clan heads couldn't bring themselves to completely trust the duke.

He may always be wearing a big innocent smile, but I don't think he's someone quite so easy to figure out... I thought to myself as I scooped up some water from the bucket further in and used it to rinse off my freshly cleaned body. The water was a bit more tepid than skin temperature, but it felt quite pleasant on my body after all this time cooking away in the steam.

After that, I wiped myself dry with a large soft cloth like a bath towel, then put my clothing back on. And when we exited the bath hall, we found our comrades from the forest's edge waiting there for us, looking just the same as before. Since I wasn't receiving any especially chilly glares, I figured that meant Chiffon Chel hadn't done any unfortunate reminiscing.

"Well then, allow me to lead you to the kitchen..."

From here on out, I already had a vague recollection of the path we had to take. After all, I had walked it every day until my confinement ended just twenty days ago. Of course, that was just a five-day period of extraordinary circumstances, but those bitter memories had been carved firmly into my mind. It would definitely take some time before I could look back on it and say something like, "Well, it actually wasn't so bad, all things considered..."

"This way, please..." Chiffon Chel said, stopping before a familiar door.

And then, one of the guards spoke up again. "This door is the only entrance to this kitchen. After inspecting the room for yourselves, we invite you to keep guard alongside us outside of it."

Darmu Ruu nodded, and then stepped inside along with Rau Lea. Then once they confirmed everything was safe, we were finally permitted to enter. And as soon as we did, Rimee Ruu let out another excited, "Ooh!"

For the first time in twenty days, I had returned to this kitchen in the Turan manor.

Even if it was just a small kitchen meant to prepare food for servants, it was

truly impressive in terms of scale and how well-equipped it was. At the forest's edge, or even in the post town, it was unthinkable to see a kitchen with such a collection of cookware, multiple workstations, and so many well-made stoves. Then there was the steel oven, the shelves packed tight, and tableware made from wood, clay, steel, and glass. Every last bit of it seemed the same as when I last laid eyes on it.

And when Reina Ruu entered the room following her little sister, the look in her eyes was that of a lovestruck young girl.

“This is amazing! This room... It's like some sort of paradise for chefs!”

If I had been invited as a proper guest instead back then, I probably would have been just as overjoyed as they were. Still, if I could overwrite some of those bitter memories with happy ones today, I'd certainly be glad.

And then when I showed them the fully furnished pantry, Rimee Ruu exploded with an even more excited shout of, “Wowie! There're so many vegetables I've never even seen! Hey, hey, what does this one taste like?”

“What is this herb? It seems to have a very bitter smell to it...”

As the two sisters carried on excitedly like children, Sheera Ruu gave an impressed sigh from beside them. The place really did seem equipped with pretty much the same abundance of ingredients as when I was forced to work here.

Cyclaeus had become a prisoner and pretty much all of his many servants were discharged, so there shouldn't have been such a need for all this food any longer. And yet, it wasn't possible to simply sever all the deals he had made with various merchants at the drop of a hat, so apparently there was still a heaping helping of ingredients delivered to the manor each and every day.

“On top of that, something has to be done with the restaurants under Cyclaeus's control and the metalworkers from Jagar he had business deals with and all that, so that guardian sure has inherited a whole heap of trouble to deal with,” Kamyua Yoshu had said.

Duke Genos's house would take over in managing the majority of that, but Cyclaeus had dipped his hands into dealings in a lot of different fields, so it

would supposedly take quite a bit of time and effort to put an end to all of them.

But, well, we were leaving all that up to the nobles, while we had our own work to focus on.

“All right, shall we get started? First up is making the soup.”

After somehow managing to calm down the overly excited sisters, I issued instructions to bring out the required ingredients where we needed them.

Since we were cooking for thirteen guests plus providing for our group of chefs and guards too, we were talking quite a lot of food. We carried in aria, nenon, chatchi, gigo, tau oil, rock salt, and fuwano flour, but just as we were about to start cutting, there was a knock on the door from the outside.

“Asuta, the chefs from the castle town say they wish to greet you,” Ai Fa called out as the door swung open and a group of men in white outfits streamed into the kitchen.

When I spied a young, pale-skinned man with plenty of freckles I called out, “Ah, Roy! You’re participating in this dinner party too?”

“Yeah. Just as an assistant chef, though,” the young chef formerly from this manor replied, his expression a complex mix of anger and something else entirely. When Ai Fa and Polarth had come and rescued me, he had been there at the entrance to see me off, but it was in front of Cyclaeus and Lefreya, and there hadn’t been any time for a proper goodbye.

“He’s quite exceptionally skilled for such a young age, so I asked to have him assist me today,” a voice with a strangely nice tenor to it interjected. It had come from the oldest of the four men dressed in white, who politely bowed my way. “You are the chef from the forest’s edge, Sir Asuta of the Fa clan, correct? I am a chef from Selva’s Spear and the former assistant head chef of this manor, Timalo.”

In terms of age, he seemed to be a bit past his forties. Though he was skinny overall, his stomach alone jutted out a bit, and he had an overall gentle, calm feel about him. He had the skin color of a westerner, and his eyes and the hair spilling out from under his cylindrical hat were both a deep brown. His face was

smooth with a good complexion, but for some reason he had a bit of white cloth over his mouth.

“Pleased to meet you. I’m Asuta of the Fa clan. Umm... Let’s both give tonight our all.”

“Yes. We shall both dedicate all of our skill to strengthening the bonds between Genos and the forest’s edge.”

It looked like underneath that cloth, Timalo was grinning broadly.

His actions really were perfectly composed and natural...aside from the fact that his eyes didn’t especially seem like they were smiling.

“From what I’ve heard, the four of you here will be carrying out today’s work. And so, I prepared the same number of personnel in turn.”

“Huh? You matched what we were doing?”

“Yes. And though our kitchen is stocked with a great many more ingredients, I promise here and now that we shall not lay a hand on anything not also available in this place.”

“Umm... What exactly are you talking about?”

The way he spoke left me unsettled, for some reason.

But even as that thought ran through my head, Timalo just stared at my face and smiled.

“There’s no need for you to worry. I simply wish to present dishes under the exact same conditions as you, Sir Asuta of the Fa clan. It is not as if using rare and unusual ingredients is enough to improve a dish in and of itself, and so I also wish to try making the greatest dishes possible from a limited stock.”

From my point of view, stuff like reten oil and panam honey already felt plenty unusual, but apparently even more kinds of ingredients filled their stores.

Now that I thought back on it, I was pretty sure Mikel had once told me Cyclaeus’s main pantry was essentially a treasure trove. At any rate, though, it didn’t seem like I’d be alleviating the unease whirling about in my chest anytime soon.

“Umm, today’s dinner party isn’t a taste competition, but a chance for Duke Genos and the leading clan heads to enjoy themselves, right?”

“Why, yes, of course! I’m simply overjoyed to once again be able to serve food to the same table as you, considering all the praise Lady Lefreya heaped upon your cooking, Sir Asuta. Let us work our hardest today, with our pride as chefs on the line.”

“Right. I look forward to working alongside you.”

Timalo nodded, and then like an actor from some play, he elegantly turned about face.

Before he could leave, though, Roy called out from behind.

“Timalo, is it all right if I take just a little bit more time here? I’m acquainted with him from back when we worked together in the same kitchen.”

“Yes, I don’t mind. If we’re aiming for identical conditions, though, it wouldn’t do to not spend the same amount of time on our dishes. As such, we’ll wait for you to return before starting.”

“Thank you. I’ll be back soon.”

With that, Timalo and the other two assistant chefs exited the kitchen, leaving just Roy behind.

Giving a little sigh, the young chef glared my way.

“Well, you can see how it is. Timalo intends to face you with everything he has, so you better not go slipping up, all right?”

It was a sudden statement, not taking any time to savor our reunion or the like. Well, that certainly was just like Roy, though.

“I mean, I definitely intend to give this job my all too. Though, it seems that Timalo man doesn’t like me very much, huh?”

“Of course he doesn’t. No matter what you two made, his dishes never came out on top, so he’s desperate to reclaim his pride as a chef. If I were in his position, I’d probably feel exactly the same way.”

As he talked, Roy’s brow seriously furrowed. He was blunt, and his tone was

crude. Yup, just like Chiffon Chel, he didn't seem to have changed a bit.

That made me a little happy, so I started to break out in a smile, only for Roy to question, "What're you grinning about?" and shoot me an even scarier look. "Just so you know, Timalo's specialty is karon dishes. Back then, Lady Lefreya insisted on nothing but kimyuus cooking. If you let your guard down thinking you're facing the same opponent as before, you'll have the carpet pulled out from under you."

"You say all that, but I mean, I'm not looking at this like a taste competition..."

"Even so, you'd feel frustrated if the guests only praised Timalo's cooking, right?"

"Ah, yeah, that could definitely be frustrating."

"And you've got to use giba meat of all things too. Can you really make a proper dish with an ingredient like that?"

"That certainly won't be an issue. Though with that said, I've only ever had karon torso meat when taste testing your cooking..."

It didn't seem like it would be possible to use such an ingredient at the forest's edge or in the post town, so I had disregarded the matter entirely.

"That doesn't exactly give me confidence..." Roy grumbled. "I know your skills better than anyone. But giba meat has a reputation of being smelly, hard, and practically inedible, doesn't it? Are you really going to be all right?"

"I'll be fine. It would be nice if I could show you how delicious giba meat is too, though," I replied, only for Roy's eyes to slowly narrow.

"You really *are* confident, aren't you...?"

"Yeah, at least when it comes to the taste of giba."

Mikel and Yang had already acknowledged how delicious of an ingredient it was. And so, I trusted the tastiness of giba meat would get through to even folks from the castle town.

"In that case, go ahead and make a set of meals for the chefs. Actually, I guess you don't need to make *that* much... There are four of us on each side, so we can each make half of the total meals we'll eat and then share. I'll try to

convince Timalo to play along with that too.”

“Huh? But why do you need to do that?”

“The words of the guests alone may not be enough to satisfy Timalo. If a rumor started spreading around that the people of the forest’s edge took advantage of the nobles’ kindness to have them say your food was delicious when it really wasn’t, you wouldn’t exactly be happy about it, right?”

“Is that Timalo guy the sort to go making up rumors like that...?”

“Well, at the very least I’d say he’s the sort that won’t accept a loss until he’s confirmed it with his own tongue,” Roy said with an irritated snort. “And while he’s definitely a skilled chef, I can’t exactly vouch for his personality once he steps out of the kitchen. Just earlier, you saw him making a big show of covering his mouth, right? That’s a way of expressing that he doesn’t want to breathe the same air as lowly people like you. I guess he’s been infected by the nastier side of nobles by only ever dealing with them...”

“Ah, he sounds like a pain to deal with...”

However, I had no intention of bringing personal feelings into today’s work. And so I started thinking about how to best handle things, only to feel a tug on my T-shirt’s sleeve from the side.

“Asuta, I don’t care how such an unreasonable person looks at us, but, well, I’m very much curious about what types of food chefs from the castle town make,” Reina Ruu chimed in. There was indeed a strong look of pure curiosity and ambition shining in her eyes. “You’re the only one allowed to attend the dinner party, right? But if it’s at all possible, I would certainly like the chance to see cooking from the castle town with my own two eyes and confirm what it tastes like. Is that all right...?”

“Hmm, yeah... Well, I don’t really see any issue with each side tasting the other’s cooking.”

Even if nasty rumors spread throughout the castle town, I couldn’t see it having any noticeable impact on our business in the post town. But it was true that I found the idea of someone going after the reputation of food they hadn’t even eaten extremely unpleasant.

“Ah, but isn’t it against the customs of the forest’s edge to eat food prepared at another stove?” I asked, only for Reina Ruu to duck her head with a mischievous smile. It was a gesture that would perfectly fit a sound effect like “Teehee.”

“It’s ultimately just a taste test, so I’m sure even dad won’t be able to get angry with us over it.”

As I thought to myself, *She’s kept such a charming look hidden all this time?* I turned to Roy with a strained smile.

“All right. Then could you ask Timalo to...” I started, only to suddenly hold my tongue. Up until now, Roy had been wearing a real irritated look, but suddenly he was standing there with his mouth hanging wide open. And his eyes, opened wide with surprise, were looking right at Reina Ruu.

“Umm, is something the matter...?” Reina Ruu asked with a slightly troubled smile.

Roy shook his head so fast it looked like the hat would be flung from his head, and then he shot me a glare.

“W-Well, I guess that covers things. But if you go and serve up shabby dishes after all that big talk, you’ll have no excuses when I ridicule you for it.”

“Right. I’ll give it my all so that doesn’t happen.”

“Hmph...!” Roy snorted for seemingly no particular reason, and then after stealing one more glance at Reina Ruu, he exited the kitchen.

Ai Fa and Ludo Ruu had just silently watched over the whole exchange, and now they once again closed the door.

“He certainly was noisy, wasn’t he?” Reina Ruu said with a smile, apparently not understanding any of what just happened.

Just like when we did business in the post town, she currently had on a thin veil and shawl, which made her look quite adorable. Though she was on the small side, her face and body were very nicely proportioned. I figured it was quite rare to find such a thoroughly charming woman.

Still, I can’t imagine Donda Ruu would be fond of his daughters all marrying

men from town... The whole thing with Vina Ruu and Shumiral alone probably has him at his limits already.

And as I stowed away that unasked-for commentary in the back of my mind, I stated, "All right then, how about we get to work?"

2

Soon time was flying by again as we steadily crossed off our tasks. We had already planned out our operational procedure in advance, so there were no issues on that front. The girls with me had spent a lot of time the last few days training to make these new dishes, and I couldn't see any issues whatsoever with their performance.

It went without saying that Reina and Sheera Ruu had no problems, since they specialized in manning the stove, but Rimee Ruu was also showing astounding skill. I know they say you become good at what you like doing, but I got the feeling that the young girl's cooking skills had grown to around the same level as her mother's.

Now that I think about it, all the chefs I've seen from the castle town have been men.

From what I could recall, overwhelmingly more men worked as professional chefs than women back in my old world too.

Part of the reason was that cooking required more stamina than you might expect. When you were cutting up ingredients and heating them over a flame, and then you had to make enough for over a dozen people, it could definitely be called a battle of endurance.

But the women of the forest's edge seemed to have bottomless stamina, and it was readily apparent how passionate the girls present were about cooking. And they had great palates on top of that, so I couldn't think of better allies to have by my side.

Still... Just how much more skilled are they than the folks from the post town, I wonder?

There wasn't anybody who called themselves a chef in the post town. The

owners of the inns and their wives just saw the food they served as nothing but an extension of their home cooking.

The same was true for Reina Ruu and everyone, though. I had only given the women of the forest's edge just a bit of instruction over the course of the past several months, but before that they had generally likely paid even less attention to manning the stove than the folks from the post town. And yet, now I believed their cooking would easily come out on top. If nothing else, they at least had the same powerful advantage that I did: giba meat.

In actuality, Nail and Naudis had both succeeded at making fairly successful dishes using giba meat. And they had their own advantages in the form of chitt seeds and tau oil, both imported ingredients. Thanks to that, they were currently thriving.

But lately, karon milk and milk fat had started circulating throughout the post town. And now that Cyclaeus had fallen, the ingredients he had been buying up could even start overflowing to the post town too after spreading throughout the castle town.

Overly expensive ingredients would of course be out of the question, but it seemed like it would be reasonable to expect to be able to buy stuff in the same price range as, say, tau oil. And if that happened, it would surely lead to an improvement in the cuisine on offer in the post town.

When that time came, just how far would Reina and Sheera Ruu's skills take them? They certainly wouldn't fall significantly short, but would they be able to stay on top? I couldn't help but hope they would strive their hardest to do so.

"Ah, that's a bell sound!" Rimee Ruu excitedly proclaimed while mincing up giba meat. "How neat! It rang four times, so does that mean it's the fourth hour?"

"Yeah. So I suppose that means we have half of our scheduled time left."

The dinner party would begin when the sun set during the sixth hour. That meant we had a little over two hours to go. And fortunately, everything was still progressing quite smoothly.

However, we were soon interrupted by another knock on the kitchen door.

“Asuta, Kamyua Yoshu is asking to see you,” Ai Fa called out, only for the aloof man’s long and narrow face to peek into the room.

“Hey there, Asuta. Sorry for bothering you while you’re working, but I’ve got some things I’d like to report. Is that all right?”

“Yeah, I don’t mind. Please, come on in.”

“Ah, no. I’ve been running all over so I’m coated in dirt and dust. I don’t want to make a mess in your kitchen, so could you step outside for a bit instead?”

“All right, I’m coming.”

After wiping down my hand with a cloth, I went ahead and walked over his way.

Kamyua Yoshu pulled his head back out, and I stepped outside right after him. In the hallway I found the two soldiers keeping watch, the four hunters guarding us, Kamyua Yoshu...and one more young fellow I recognized.

“Ah, you’re...”

“Yup. Sir Welhide of the ducal house of Banarm. I happened to run into him when I stopped by the castle, so I quickly brought him over as soon as I could.”

The young black-haired man’s pale, noble-looking face wore a fastidious expression as he silently nodded. I really had no clue how high-ranking he was as the sixth in line to inherit a ducal house in some other territory, but I certainly didn’t want to go making any careless blunders, so I went ahead and gave a bow at what seemed like a suitable-enough angle.

Kamyua Yoshu continued, “Though half a month has passed since that meeting, Ciluel is apparently continuing to feign ignorance. It really isn’t looking like we’ll be able to settle anything without a formal trial.”

“Oh, I see.”

“And as for Cyclaeus, he doesn’t have much strength to talk, and he certainly doesn’t seem to be trying to do so either. If things keep going like this and Cyclaeus succumbs to his illness and draws his last breath, it’ll leave us in a real troublesome situation.”

“Right. The leading clan heads have concerns about that too. So we really do

need Cyclaeus's testimony in order to pass proper judgment on Ciluel?"

"Yup, since it's seeming pretty likely that if Cyclaeus passes away, Ciluel will try to shove all of the crimes on his dead brother. Thanks to the attack he tried to pull off at the meeting, he won't be able to escape all of his crimes like that, but we want to fully adjudicate their past offenses too."

"I wouldn't be able to face my father if the truth was buried in the shadows for such a reason..." Welhide whispered, an intense look on his face. "Was it Cyclaeus or Ciluel who caused my father's death? If we cannot at least determine that much, then I'll be liable to be the one left dying in a fit of indignation."

"Right. The boy in my care, Leito, is in much the same position as you are, so I can certainly understand that way of thinking," Kamyua Yoshu agreed, trying to make as serious of an expression as he could with his usually aloof face. "So anyway, though I'm sure you've got some strong feelings of your own on the matter, I'd really like you to give your all to make something that can satisfy Cyclaeus, Asuta. No matter how hard we try appealing to his heart and mind, I can't imagine us ever reforming him, though."

"I don't know about trying to appeal to him, but now that I've decided to cook, I want to make the best meal that I can."

"Yup, I'm counting on you. And Cyclaeus's meal will be delivered after the dinner party with the leading clan heads, right?"

"Yes. I have to attend the party, so it has to wait till that's over."

The biggest issue was the question of whether or not Cyclaeus would have the strength needed to even eat my cooking in his weakened state.

But all I could do was carry out the work in front of me. It was true that my feelings about all this were complicated, but regardless, I went ahead and gave Kamyua Yoshu a bow.

"Well then, I'll be getting back to work. Excuse me."

"Ah, hold on a moment! There's still one more thing we need to discuss!"

"Huh? What is it?"

“Umm...” Kamyua Yoshu murmured, his tall, lanky frame squirming in a way that was quite unlike him. It probably went without saying, but he didn’t look cute in the least. “The thing is, I know it’s impolite to ask, but...well, would it be possible for me to have some of your cooking too?”

“Hmm? You mean the meal we’re preparing for everyone on guard and kitchen duty?”

“Yeah. Someone in my position could never hope to participate in the dinner party, after all. And so I was wondering if you could grant me just a bit of the food you’re preparing for everyone else... Is it too much to ask after all?”

“No, we brought along plenty of giba meat, so as long as we don’t have any sudden massive slip-ups, we can prepare as much as we need.”

As soon as I said that, Kamyua Yoshu’s eyes started to sparkle.

If I betrayed his expectations now, just how sad of a face would he make? I was a little tempted to find out, but I would never actually go and do something so mean.

“All right, we’ll go ahead and get it ready. The dinner for the chefs has to wait till after the party, though, so understand that it’ll be pretty late.”

“Of course! Thank you! I owe you one, Asuta!”

“Is giba meat cooking really that delicious...?” Welhide asked quizzically. “My apologies if this statement upsets you, but I have heard it said that giba meat isn’t something most can even eat. Obviously, rumors about how it will make you grow horns and the like are mere folk tales, but still, Genos is even more well off than Banarm, is it not?”

“Yup, sure is. I’ve been invited to some real unusual dinners by Duke Genos myself, but it’s a shock to hear him going with giba dishes... Ah, but nothing else out there compares to Asuta’s cooking.”

“Ah, er, please don’t go overboard with raising his expectations like that...”

“It’s fine! Your cooking’s deliciousness comes across to anyone who eats it, no matter their status! Whether noble or commoner, there doesn’t exist a single person alive who can deny your skill!”

I gave a deep, deep sigh.

And Welhide's mouth was still hanging open with a suspicious look... In fact, it was like his expression had frozen in place for some reason.

"Um, Asuta, I'm terribly sorry to interrupt your conversation, but there's a little something I'd like to ask you..." a voice called out timidly from behind. Turning to look, I found Reina Ruu peeking halfway out the door. "I opened a new bottle of fruit wine, but it's really sour and doesn't seem usable. Could we swap it out for another fruit wine?"

"Ah, no, that's made from mamaria just like the fruit wine, but it's actually something called vinegar. I believe there should still be some normal fruit wine left on the shelves, though."

"Oh, I see! I'm sorry I jumped to a conclusion there..."

"You've got nothing to apologize for. It would be nice if we could start handling mamaria vinegar at the forest's edge and in the post town too, though," I replied as I slowly turned my gaze. Welhide's eyes were still open wide in surprise, and naturally, they were looking right at Reina Ruu.

The second Ruu daughter also noticed that and asked with a troubled smile, "Um, is something the matter?" And just like Roy had done earlier, Welhide vigorously shook his head in response.

Umm... If I'm seeing what I think I'm seeing, do the people of the castle town and Banarm not have as strong a prejudice against the people of the forest's edge, since they aren't as intimately familiar with how terrifying giba are?

Knowing nothing of the thoughts running through my head, Kamyua Yoshu then brightly proclaimed, "Now then! I feel bad about interfering with your work, so I suppose it's about time for us to head out. The second son of the house of Daleim will arrive soon, so why don't I go ahead and introduce you to him, Lord Welhide?"

"A-Ah, yes... Please do so."

At that, Kamyua Yoshu and Welhide departed.

With a tilted head, Reina Ruu returned to the kitchen, and having watched

over the whole exchange, Rau Lea stroked his narrow chin and said, “Hmm... Well, it’s hard to ignore how she can be a bit childish at times, but I guess Reina Ruu is definitely quite the looker. Slender beauties like Ai Fa here are more my type, though.”

“What are you babbling about, all of a sudden...?” Ai Fa questioned, shooting Rau Lea a frightening glare.

“I mean, I’m just stating my true feelings. I told you before, didn’t I? That if you weren’t a hunter, I’d definitely want you for a bride.”

“Again, what are you—”

“I’m telling you, I’m talking about your looks, as a woman. We’re at the age where it’s about time for us to get serious about getting married, right, Darmu Ruu?”

Darmu Ruu seemed to have an aura of irritation about him like whirling black flames as he silently closed his eyes. And then, he quietly called out, “Asuta of the Fa clan.”

“Yes? What is it?!”

“If you’re done here, then get back to work...”

“Right, understood...”

Darmu Ruu had reached a point where he had withdrawn and stated he would no longer criticize Ai Fa’s way of life. Of course, Rau Lea wasn’t at fault as he knew nothing at all about that, but it still made for quite the nerve-wracking exchange.

Now that I think about it, I recall hearing Ratsu and Gaaz men have proposed to Ai Fa too.

Were those sorts of worries that occurred between men and women universal, no matter which world you were in?

At any rate, I somehow managed to get myself back on track, focusing once again on my work.



From there, the hours ticked along, and by the time we started needing the light from the candles on the walls, we had managed to finish six different dishes.

With just the meat and fuwano, er, poitan dishes, we wanted to serve them up nice and hot, so they were currently sitting uncooked atop the work station.

“We get to eat once Papa Donda and everyone are done with dinner, right? Ugh, I’m starving,” Rimee Ruu complained.

“In that case, you should have stolen some nibbles here and there. Should I fry up just a bit of tatsuta age for you?”

“No! I’m gonna hold off and let the excitement build for later!”

As we were having that conversation, there was another knock on the door. This time, the one to appear was Chiffon Chel.

“The bells for the sixth hour will be ringing shortly... Sir Asuta, could I have you move to the dining hall...?”

“Got it. Is it all right to bring along the appetizer at this point?”

“Yes... Those on duty shall carry it...”

Following that statement, two of the pages dressed in yellow uniforms entered the kitchen. I had seen the pages frequently around the manor, but these boys seemed to be part of a different lineup.

They sat the big plate with the appetizer and the wooden plates for portioning it out atop a stylish wheeled cart. Then they placed a bowl-shaped lid over the plate, like a cloche or some sort of dust cover, hiding the food from view.

“Ah, right, do you not need to test it for poison?”

“I do not... The custom of testing for poison was only put in place by the previous lord of this house, I am told...”

“I see. So that’s how it was, huh?”

Kamyua Yoshu had said something about Cyclaeus’s father dying by poison. Though the truth of the matter still hadn’t been made clear, that was likely why

he had implemented such a practice.

We still don't know anywhere near enough about the nobles of this world.

Cyclaeus was a wicked man who derided the people of the forest's edge, calling them barbarians.

That seemed to go even more so for Ciluel.

As for Lefreya, her sense of ethics seemed to be missing a few pieces.

But Polarth felt like a cheerful, carefree sort of guy.

And Melfried was the complete opposite, stern to a fault.

That old legal official, Zylus, had come from a branch of the Saturas house, and, well, he seemed solemn and trustworthy.

Welhide seemed like a really earnest young man.

And finally there was Marstein, who I still couldn't completely pin down.

Still, I had only spent a very short amount of time around any of those nobles, not just Marstein. Exactly what sort of institution was the aristocracy of the Western Kingdom of Selva? And were they at all compatible with the people of the forest's edge? Today's dinner party would be a litmus test for those questions.

"Asuta, please take care," Reina Ruu called out.

"Yeah, same for all of you."

With that, I exited the kitchen alongside the page boys. Darmu Ruu and Rau Lea remained behind, while Ai Fa and Ludo Ruu followed along as guards.

Under Chiffon Chel's guidance, we walked down the labyrinth of hallways. And unsurprisingly, what appeared before us at the end of it all was an imposing set of double doors.

This was the room that Lefreya had summoned me to in days past. Back then, not only had Lefreya and Diel been present, but later also Polarth and Ai Fa...when I was finally released from my five days of imprisonment.

"We have brought the chef from the forest's edge, Sir Asuta of the Fa clan!" one of the page boys announced in a soprano voice.

As the soldiers opened the doors, the hall for the dinner party came into view, complete with the nobles of Genos and leading clan heads of the forest's edge seated there.

"Ah, Asuta of the Fa clan. My apologies for troubling you so much today," a male voice cheerfully called out. It had come from Marstein, seated at the head of the massive table. And next to him sat Welhide, who was here as the witness to this event.

The chandelier giving off a dazzling white light, the half-human half-beast stone statues guarding the four corners of the room, the velvet tapestry covering the brick walls, and the long-piled dark purple carpet... Everything was just as I remembered it. And though there had been plenty of room to spare at the massive table back then, today it was filled with guests.

On the right-hand side was the group from the forest's edge: Donda Ruu, Gulaf Zaza, Dari Sauti, Gazraan Rutim, and the Beim and Fou clan heads.

To the left were the nobles of Genos: Lefreya, the upper-middle-aged man who was apparently her new guardian, Melfried, Polarth, and a slim young man who was apparently the representative for the house of Saturas.

It really was a distinguished group of thirteen. On top of that, on either side of Marstein and Welhide there were two ducal guards in white and a young female attendant.

And along the wall on the noble side, Timalo was standing up straight, accompanied by two pages just as I had been. Naturally, he wasn't hiding his mouth in any way at present. Instead, he simply wore a polite, composed expression.

"Asuta of the Fa clan, you should wait there alongside the leading clan heads. Once the bell for the sixth hour rings, the dinner party will begin."

"Right," I nodded as I moved into position as I was told. Ai Fa and Ludo Ruu, meanwhile, remained in front of the now closed doors, their piercing gazes scanning the room.

It seemed everyone in the group from the forest's edge had handed over their blades, which meant the only ones armed in this place were the four soldiers at

the head of the table, as well as Ai Fa and Ludo Ruu.

Of course, the antechamber was likely packed with ducal guards on standby, but considering the capabilities possessed by hunters of the forest's edge, they could surely take control of the room at a moment's notice. And so, this overly lax guard setup was undoubtedly a show of Marstein's trust.

"I believe this is your first time meeting each other, Asuta of the Fa clan. This is the man who will be Lady Lefreya's guardian from now on, Torst, and the first son of Count Saturas, Leeheim."

I had trouble remembering so many names thrown out one after another, but at any rate I gave them each a bow.

Torst was a little man with a smushed face like a pug's who was heading into his twilight years, while Leeheim was a skinny young man with oily dark brown hair. The former had on a milky white frock very similar to the one worn by Polarth, while the latter wore a Jagar-style collared outfit much like Marstein. It seemed that nobles had a fondness for wearing attire in the style of Jagar.

What grabbed my attention even more so, though, was Lefreya.

Her crudely-chopped chestnut brown hair had been styled into an adorable short bob, but any expression whatsoever had been wiped clean from her face.

There was a tiara sitting atop her head, and her small body was clad in a white dress coated in frills and ribbons. Her skin looked utterly untouched by the sun, and overall she had a cute appearance like a French doll... But by the same token, she really did feel like some delicate object, not showing any signs of human emotion.

Of course, considering her current standing, she couldn't exactly go about being all haughty. But still, she really was acting utterly unlike her usual little tyrant self.

"Well then, how about I give you all a little greeting before the dinner party begins?" Marstein proposed in his usual relaxed tone.

His long dark brown hair was tied together loosely behind his neck, and the collar of his white formal cloak was loose as well. He had a very youthful visage, and his tawny eyes had a bright yet firm shine to them, while underneath his

neatly-trimmed mustache he wore a cheerful smile. If nothing else, he really didn't seem to be cut from the same cloth as his son Melfried.

“As I've already announced, this dinner party is an event meant to foster goodwill and reforge the bonds between our land of Genos and the people of the forest's edge. Up until now, the former head of the house of Turan, Cyclaeus, has been in charge of such mediation. However, he is suspected of conspiring along with the leading clan head who ruled before the previous one and bringing calamity to the western kingdom. And we find that a grave, unprecedented matter.”

None of the leading clan heads or nobles interjected so much as a single word.

Even Lefreya just silently stared off into the distance.

“As the one who rules over Genos, I must atone for these crimes alongside the people of the forest's edge. And to this end, I believe it necessary to join together and understand one another. As part of our efforts, Lady Lefreya has officially become the next Countess Turan, while Torst has become her guardian. And I will also announce here and now that my first son Melfried, head of the ducal guard, has been appointed to act as mediator with the people of the forest's edge.”

I quietly gasped.

We had already known about Lefreya and her guardian, but this was my first time hearing about Melfried's new post.

It certainly was true that Marstein couldn't have chosen anyone closer to him for the part, though.

“That's all from me. I've set aside time for a meeting after dinner to discuss all the troublesome details, so for now let's enjoy the meal kindly prepared by Timalo and Asuta of the Fa clan and deepen the friendship between us.”

Marstein slowly looked over everyone present.

Nobody seemed to be showing any real emotion in response, Lefreya foremost among them. Though, I did spy Polarth stealing timid glances at the hunters, and next to him Leeheim was somewhat sulkily casting his gaze

downward. Perhaps that was down to the power difference between the houses of counts and dukes, as they didn't seem to be able to act as resolutely as the younger Welhide.

Still, this sure is a crazy sight.

On the right were the strong, dauntless, and frank dark-skinned hunters of the forest's edge, clad in their giba cloaks and brimming with the energy of wild beasts. And to the left were the sophisticated and refined nobles of the city of stone, clad in white frocks reminiscent of characters from Greek myth, or collared uniforms in what I'd have called a western style back in my old world. The two sides of the huge table looked as if they had come from different worlds entirely as they sat there facing one another.

Up until now, the nobles and the people of the forest's edge had essentially no interaction whatsoever. Just how much of the gap between them that had been growing for eighty years could be filled in tonight...? I had absolutely no way of knowing at this point.

But at any rate, from his position right in the middle, Marstein alone gave a composed smile and a satisfied nod.

It was then that a bell solemnly rang out from somewhere.

"It's now the sixth hour. So, how about we get this dinner party started...?"

3

"This is the appetizer that I have prepared," Timalo stated, presenting his dish first.

As he removed the lid on the large metal pot, a truly complex aroma started wafting throughout the room.

"It is tofos egg dressed with ramanpa nut dip."

This was my first time hearing of ramanpa nuts. And though he had claimed he would only use ingredients also available in our kitchen, I had no way of knowing which one they were.

At any rate, the pages went ahead and started portioning out the dish atop

clay plates. From a distance, all I could make out was what looked to be a gleaming, slightly yellowish dip.

The Fou clan head was seated lowest on the forest's edge's side, which placed him right next to me, and when his plate was delivered I stole a glance. And sure enough, it seemed to be a dish dressed with a dip.

The yellowish color had come from the egg yolk, while the shine looked to be from some sort of oil. And since the white of a toto's egg didn't actually take on a white color when heated, it had become a translucent dip, which was shining in the light from the chandelier.

Mixed inside that translucent dip I could see a number of carrot-like nenon, potato-esque chatchi, and other such vegetables diced into little cubes. And in overwhelmingly greater quantity was a heaping helping of what looked like finely-chopped walnuts.

"The ramanpa nuts were smoked with pepetto herbs, and the various vegetables were pickled in reten oil. By kneading them together with the toto's egg, you get this dish."

"This certainly is an elaborate appetizer to start with," Marstein proclaimed in amusement, and Timalo smiled back.

Then, the duke's gaze slowly turned my way.

"Sir Asuta, please proceed with your preparations."

"Right, well then..."

Mine isn't elaborate at all, though, I thought to myself as I lifted the lid off the dish.

Atop the somewhat large and deep wooden plate was a nice pile of gigo cut into rectangular slices. As I separated that out, I placed a dried kiki dip made with a light bit of tau oil and soup stock on top. That was the entirety of the preparations needed for my appetizer.

I went with this as it felt like a proper appetizer to me, but is it too simple?

After chopping up the yam-like gigo into rectangular slices, I garnished it with a dip made using the plum-esque dried kiki. Then I mixed in the tau oil and soup

stock to replace the dashi, soy sauce, mirin, and sugar mix.

“That seems to be quite a simple dish,” Marstein stated, causing Timalo to shoot me a grin. “But I would say it’s a wonderful dish for displaying the honest and simple lifestyles held by the people of the forest’s edge.”

“Ah, thank you.”

I had no idea how much I needed to humble myself at such a formal event, so I ultimately kept my words to a minimum. Still, I felt more than a little awkward, considering the dish was prepared in the style of the Tsurumi Restaurant rather than the forest’s edge.

Yam with pickled plum dip... Our customers who were heavy drinkers loved it, and so did my old man, but how will it be received here?

As we portioned out our dishes for the guests, the attendants filled their cups with fruit wine. And even when faced with the intimidating gazes of the hunters, the women remained courteous and expressionless. They certainly seemed to have more guts than Polarth or the young lord from the house of Saturas.

At any rate, by the time everyone’s cups were filled, my dish and Timalo’s had made it all the way around.

“Well then, let us eat.”

Apparently, the noble side didn’t have any pre-meal rituals. And so, as the hunters of the forest’s edge recited their words of gratitude, the other side grabbed hold of their metal spoons.

“Ah, what a wonderful flavor,” Marstein praised as he started with Timalo’s appetizer. “The taste from the ramanpa is truly superb. Their aromatic nature pairs exquisitely with the tolos eggs.”

“I’m honored to hear that it is to your tastes,” Timalo replied with a truly satisfied looking grin.

Almost all the nobles seemed to start with Timalo’s dish.

The one exception was Lefreya, who took hold of the plate with my cooking and quietly stated, “Asuta of the Fa clan. This dish seems somehow slippery, like

it will slide from everyone's spoons."

"Ah, my apologies. I believe it would be easier to eat with wooden spoons than metal ones, or perhaps forked metal skewers," I replied, figuring I needed to watch my tone considering the current circumstances.

"I see," Lefreya quietly murmured, picking up a wooden spoon from atop the table. Even as she brought my cooking to her lips that were the color of budding cherry blossoms, her expression still didn't shift.

"Hmm... This is my first time eating gigo that hasn't been heated through. Is this what's customary at the forest's edge? Or does it come from your homeland, Asuta...?" Marstein asked with a smile.

"It's a dish from my home country," I replied.

"I see," Marstein stated as he took a bite of the gigo and dried kiki dip. "This certainly is a novel taste. The sourness of the dried kiki wipes away the earthiness of the gigo, so it isn't hard to get down in the least. In fact, I'd say it's rather pleasant."

"I'm honored..."

Meanwhile, the people of the forest's edge kept silently chewing away at my dish. They had little interest in cooking that didn't use giba meat to begin with, so their reactions were unsurprisingly restrained.

However, I heard the Fou clan head, who was seated closest to me, whisper, "This is what raw gigo tastes like...? In the Fou clan, we only ever use it to mix in with poitan. What a mysterious flavor..."

"Oh, is it to your liking?"

"Well, I certainly can't say I dislike it. Though actually, it seems to make me feel even hungrier somehow..."

"Right. That's actually the main purpose of this dish."

I wasn't well acquainted with cooking full course meals, so all I could figure out for an appetizer was that it should stir up the appetite. I had chosen this dish in order to get the stomach moving and increase expectations for what would come next, but how was it working out? At least for now, I sadly didn't

have anyone else giving concrete impressions.

But at any rate, the pages had left with the carts in the meantime, no doubt to go get the soup dishes that would come next.

“Hmm, this is a peculiar taste,” Dari Sauti suddenly said quite loudly. When I turned to look, I saw he was holding a plate with Timalo’s appetizer.

“Sir Dari Sauti, is it not to your tastes?” Marstein calmly asked, only for the leading clan head to roughly scratch his head with his thick fingers.

“I don’t know about that, it’s just... I just find this slimy texture more than a little unpleasant.”

That certainly was frank. However, Timalo just shot him a perfectly calm smile.

“That is assuredly the feel added from kneading the reten oil into the dip. It could be a touch difficult to accustom yourself to if it is your first time eating it.”

“Hmm. Asuta’s dish is slimy too, but this is a bit... Hrmm, could I get some fruit wine too?”

Meanwhile, Donda Ruu and Gulaf Zaza had swiftly finished off both appetizers and were chugging down fruit wine. The silver cups were no bigger than a small mug, so for the leading clan heads, they only amounted to a single gulp. It seemed like it must be pretty irritating for them, having to wait for an attendant to fill it back up each time.

Still, as long as nothing too unbearable occurred, the plan for today was to abide by the customs of the castle town. That was the decision the group from the forest’s edge had come to, so that they could see what the nobles were thinking and feeling, as well as how those elites of the castle town would treat them.

“Yes, I’m quite taken by Sir Asuta’s cooking as well,” Polarth chimed in, a truly carefree grin on his charmingly round face. “Sir Timalo’s dish is quite elaborate, and I certainly look forward to seeing what he will serve up from here on out, but Sir Asuta’s leaves me in a state where my stomach is pestering me, begging for the next morsel. I would say that both make for wonderful appetizers.”

“Thank you,” Timalo and I stated in unison.

I was personally relieved to hear such an impression perfectly matching up with what I was aiming for, but Timalo had a seriously displeased look in his eyes. He must have been thinking something like, “Don’t go lumping my cooking in with such a crude dish.”

At any rate, as soon as everyone had set down their spoons and caught their breath, the next dishes had appeared: the soups.

“Ah, what a lovely smell!” Polarth stated, his nose twitching. He was referring to the milk fat aroma wafting from Timalo’s pot.

Roy did the same thing, so is it the custom in the castle town to use plenty of milk fat in soups?

When Timalo removed the lid, even more of that sweet scent filled the room.

“This soup dish was made using karon milk fat and three varieties of herbs.”

One of those herbs seemed to be the same as the one Yang used in the post town, since there was a cinnamon-like aroma accompanying the smell of the milk fat.

“My soup dish was made with giba meat and tau oil.”

I had gone with the straightforward approach of a giba soup prepared with tau oil. To make for a lavish feast, I used giba thigh and rib meat, aria, chatchi, gigo, nenon, and pula for the ingredients. And this was a version that involved even more effort than usual, so out of everyone present, only Donda Ruu had tasted it before, when we were testing it out at the Ruu settlement.

More than anything, though, the word “giba” had caused tension to spread through the air, as if to say, “So it’s finally time?”

Lefreya and Melfried remained expressionless, but between them Torst gave a deep sigh, Polarth was averting his gaze, and Leeheim was openly frowning.

Eighty years ago, giba were seen as a symbol of calamity, and even now, they were viewed as something only eaten by the barbaric people of the forest’s edge. Even if they had heard the whispers that giba meat had become a topic of discussion in the post town, that still wouldn’t prove any comfort to these

residents of the castle town. Some seemed to have resigned themselves as martyrs atoning for Cyclaeus's crimes, while the rest were apparently unable to hide their indignation, clearly wondering why they had to suffer such a fate.

In the midst of all that, the dishes were silently distributed. Unsurprisingly, the nobles began with Timalo's dish, while the folks from the forest's edge went with mine first.

"Ah, this is nicely done too. The sweetness of the milk fat certainly is prominent," Marstein stated, taking the initiative again when it came to doling out praise. "And what exactly is this soft meat? It doesn't seem to be kimyuus skin..."

"That is karon stomach."

"Ooh, karon stomach, is it? How unusual."

I ended up letting out a silent sigh of admiration in my head too. So they cooked with organs in Genos too, huh? I certainly looked forward to the thought of figuring out just what sort of ingredient karon stomach was and experimenting with it after this dinner party.

"What is this?!" Dari Sauti suddenly shouted out in wonder. It seemed he had tasted the little trick I had added.

"That's what's known as a wonton. To make it, you coat ground giba meat in fuwano batter, then boil it."

Thanks to the competition between me and Reina Ruu, the taste of the giba soup prepared with tau oil had been more or less perfected. I figured there was still some wiggle room to play around in though, which was how I arrived at the idea of wontons.

There was nothing tricky about making them, as the method was just as I had explained to Dari Sauti. After adding water to fuwano flour, you rolled it out flat, then wrapped it around ground meat flavored with salt, pico leaves, and tau oil. Then you just had to seal them up like gyoza and let them cook together with the soup, and that was it.

The delicious flavor of the ground giba meat had been sealed properly in the jiggling boiled fuwano dough, and I felt they had turned out pretty well. At least

when we gave them a try in the Ruu kitchen, the women all gave them rave reviews.

“Hrmm, this is delicious! It’s tasty, and it somehow causes the inside of my mouth to feel pleasant. Don’t you agree, Gazraan Rutim?”

“Yes, it really is delicious.”

Gazraan Rutim was being a lot quieter than usual today. I figured in all likelihood he was busy silently observing the nobles.

As for those nobles in question, the first one to work up the nerve and grab his spoon was Polarth. His already round frame slouched into an even rounder shape as he peered intently into the dish. Then he slowly lifted the spoon, timidly brought it to his mouth... and his expression exploded with surprise.

“Oh my...” Polarth uttered, restlessly scooping up soup and slurping it down, again and again. And when he slurped up a white wonton, he shouted joyfully, “Delicious! So this is giba meat?! Sir Asuta, this is incredibly tasty! Yes, this taste is truly every bit the equal of karon breast!”

“Thank you. I’m honored to hear that.”

At that I heard a strange sort of chuckle, and when I turned to look I found Timalo’s face turned away with a strained smile. Had he let a bit of scornful laughter slip out?

However, it wasn’t long before that faint smile suddenly froze in place.

“Yes, this is certainly tasty,” Marstein agreed. “I see. I had heard giba cooking had earned quite a reputation in the post town, and now I can understand why.”

“Yes, it definitely is delicious,” Welhide said from beside him with a big nod. “Sir Asuta of the Fa clan, I am truly sorry for the rude comment I made earlier. It seems the tales of giba meat being hard and smelling bad really were just rumors.”

“Ah, I truly am honored to hear you say that,” I replied, the tension finally draining from my shoulders.

It was then that Lefreya called out, “Asuta, this dish is quite tasty.”

“Thanks. Er, um, thank you.”

At that point, I noticed Torst and Leeheim also passionately slurping down the soup. I had been worried the powerful aroma of Timalo’s dish would completely overwhelm it, but now I saw those fears were unfounded.

Meanwhile, none of the people of the forest’s edge who had tried that milk fat soup dish had shown any positive reactions.

“This one’s slimy too. Do the people of the castle town enjoy slimy cooking?”

“I believe that is the texture from the karon milk fat... Are the people of the forest’s edge not fond of oils, perhaps?”

“Hmm, but I’ve got no problem eating plenty of giba fat,” Dari Sauti grumbled as he brought the wooden spoon to his mouth.

The Fou and Beim clan heads were wearing expressions a bit reminiscent of ascetic monks. Was Timalo’s cooking really that unsuited to their tastes, considering the people of the forest’s edge used to slurp down poitan stew with that atrocious taste and texture?

Well, I had also taste tested a dish using plenty of milk fat and herbs that Roy had made. I didn’t especially have a problem with it, but I could see the people of the forest’s edge not welcoming such a complex flavor.

Then by the time everyone managed to finish their soups one way or another, the next dishes were brought out. Timalo’s was a fuwano dish, while mine was made with poitan.

“My dish is a gyama dried milk hat bake.”

“This dish is called okonomiyaki, made using poitan.”

I had never heard of a hat bake before, but at a glance it looked something like a gratin or pie. It sat atop a large clay plate, and was covered in nicely browned dried milk like a lid. Yes, this was a dish that needed the sort of oven only present in the castle town, and the appearance and aroma sure were tantalizing.

Then, there was my okonomiyaki. Since we didn’t have such a custom of eating each dish one by one back home or in the settlement at the forest’s

edge, I really ended up racking my brain over how to prepare the poitan, and this was the solution I arrived at.

I mixed together roughly-sliced tino and giba rib meat with grated gigo and poitan dissolved in water, then grilled it up. For flavoring, I used a pseudo-Worcestershire sauce made with tau oil, as well as Genos-style mayonnaise made from kimyuus egg, mamaria vinegar, and reten oil.

Still, I couldn't find any substitutes for dried bonito slices or green dried seaweed, so it felt a little lacking. As a last resort, I went ahead and washed the salt off some pickled maru and dry roasted them to place on top.

Maru was some sort of shelled creature like a little shrimp or krill that Nail used when making pickled chitt. Even though there was plenty of water around, for whatever reason Genos saw virtually no distribution of fish or shellfish. And so, I decided to use some maru to accent the dish, as a bit of valuable seafood.

By the way, I was told I should remain in the dining hall except for when it came to finishing up the main dish, so it was Reina Ruu's group who actually grilled these up. They had gotten in plenty of practice in advance for today, and so there were naturally no issues with how they turned out.

The maru might not have been a proper substitute for bonito, but I figured it would help mitigate what was lacking at least a bit. And besides, I was the only one who knew what proper okonomiyaki were like to begin with, so there was no reason for anyone else to feel something was out of place.

"How should we split these up?" one of the pages asked, looking troubled at the six round shapes sitting before him.

"I'll cut them up, so please hand out a slice to each person."

With that I cut the six okonomiyaki into four parts each, making for twenty four slices in total. Lefreya would probably be just fine with one, while I could see Donda Ruu or Gulaf Zaza needing three or four.

"What a truly unusual dish. I suppose that's just what one should expect of a visitor from overseas."

For a while Timalo had managed to restrain himself, but a thin grin slipped out as he portioned out his own dish. And as I watched, I went, *Hmm?* in my

head.

When that fragrant lid of dried milk was ruptured, what spilled out was a gooey substance that looked similar to oatmeal. Had he finely minced baked fuwano and soaked it in karon milk or something to make it? At any rate, I smelled a rich blend of milk and the dried milk.

And as I took in a deeper whiff, beyond that I picked up the sharp smell of herbs too. Looking closely, I noticed long, thin herbs like light brown leaves sprinkled here and there throughout. They weren't chitt seeds, but it seemed they were being used to add a sharp flavor to the dish. The thought of that sharpness alongside the sweetness of milk and dried milk seemed like a bit of a mismatch to me.

Is this going to be unpopular with the people of the forest's edge again?

Still, all I could do now was worry about my own dish.

"Ah, hat bake is a favorite of mine," Polarth excitedly stated as the dishes were handed out. Apparently that mix of sweet dairy products and ethnic herbs was popular here in Genos.

And then, there was a strange "guh" sound.

The Beim clan head had apparently bitten into the okonomiyaki, and was now making a really troubled face. Seeing that, the Fou clan head quietly asked, "What's the matter?" as he struggled to break off a bit of the same dish with his wooden spoon.

"It's nothing..."

"Was this dish to your liking, clan head of the Beim?"

"I didn't say a single word of the sort..."

"What's the matter with that? Objecting to Asuta's business and finding his cooking delicious are separate matters, aren't they?"

The Beim clan head attended meetings such as this one to represent the clans opposed to our doing business in the post town. But at this moment, even with a sour look on his face, he swiftly finished off the okonomiyaki.

Polarth was sitting right across from him, so he must have overheard the

conversation they just had. And so, he set aside the plate of hat bake and sliced off a bit of okonomiyaki with a silver spoon while wearing a look of great curiosity.

And then, he exploded with another outburst of, “Delicious! This truly is tasty. It’s every bit as good as that soup dish from a moment ago! Sir Asuta, this was made using poitan rather than fuwano, correct?”

“Yes. This dish is more suited to poitan, so that’s what I went with.”

“This really is amazingly delicious! If you can make a dish this good using poitan, then why not sell it in the post town?”

“This dish is difficult to eat with your hands, so it’s not well suited to a snack stall. However, I have thought about offering it at the inns if possible,” I replied, then decided to add a bit more explanation. “On top of that, I cannot make the condiment I added on top without reten oil and mamaria vinegar. That makes selling it in the post town a bit troublesome.”

If I was lacking not just the dried bonito slices and green dried seaweed but also mayonnaise, that would just be too sad of a dish. But if I could easily get a hold of reten oil and mamaria vinegar, I’d have no reason not to try selling them in the post town.

The dish had also been a big hit with the Ruu clan. All it involved was mixing the ingredients into the poitan batter, but everyone happily agreed during the taste testing that it was delicious in a whole different way compared to grilling each component separately. And the one who was most taken with the dish was Sati Lea Ruu, who was incredibly fond of baked poitan to begin with.

“I see. Still, this tau oil is an unusual flavor too. It has an unusual thickness to it, and a sourness that’s different than that of mamaria vinegar.”

“That’s from the tarapa. I boiled down some tarapa and aria and mixed it into the tau oil. And the thickness is because I added fuwano flour.”

“Ooh, I’m impressed! What do you think, Sir Leeheim...? This is what Sir Asuta can make using poitan!” Polarth asked, still all worked up as he turned to the frowning Leeheim.

“Even setting aside the matter of the poitan, it’s all been perfectly delicious.

Was this dish truly made using giba, Asuta of the Fa clan?”

“Yes. This dish uses giba chest meat, while the previous one used chest and thigh meat.”

“Still, what I cannot help but find the greatest surprise of all is how it uses poitan rather than fuwano...” the older man Torst sitting beside Lefreya sighed. “If you can make dishes like this using poitan, then the people of the post town will not so much as glance at fuwano any longer... Duke Genos, I have only just taken charge of the house of Turan and intend to give my all to restoring it to its proper place, but at this rate, its fortune may well be exhausted before the year is out.”

“There’s no need to be filled with such grief. You just need to dissolve the various business deals Cyclaeus made everywhere one by one. Simply pulling back from recklessly purchasing such a plethora of ingredients should regain you a good bit of fortune, correct?”

“But canceling those business deals shall take an incredible amount of time and effort. After all, the previous head of the house made an enormous number of them even with people of Sym and Jagar. And if we cancel them solely at our own convenience, not only the house of Turan but Genos itself could lose the trust of both nations.”

“And so I will lend you whatever aid I can. If we distribute those ingredients to restaurants with no ties to the house of Turan, perhaps even ones in the post town, then the ingredients that are delivered will not have to go to waste. Up until now, Cyclaeus monopolized such ingredients, so such distribution had been sealed off. Wouldn’t you imagine a great number of folks would be glad to hear they could purchase as much as they please of ingredients that were difficult to get up until now?” Marstein calmly replied, wetting his lips with fruit wine. “But, well, for now let’s forget all those odds and ends and just enjoy the food. Asuta of the Fa clan, your dishes have all been exquisite. It truly is astounding that you are able to cook such things at such a young age.”

“I’m greatly honored by such undeserved praise...”

As I offered that reply, I couldn’t help but think about how Lefreya was feeling. Every time Cyclaeus’s name was mentioned, I could feel myself getting

anxious.

And yet Lefreya just kept on eating the okonomiyaki, expressionless like some sort of doll.

“Asuta of the Fa clan, is there more left of your dish?” Donda Ruu suddenly called out from far away.

“Yes. There are still eleven slices left.”

“Give me three. This little portion just made me feel hungrier.”

“Ah, could I get one more too?” Polarth chimed in, jumping on board. “This is still just the third dish, so I want to leave plenty of room in my stomach, but I just can’t stand it! Aah, if I had known giba meat was this tasty, I certainly would have bought some of what you sell in the post town! I hope that those ruffians are captured as soon as possible so that you can resume your business, Sir Asuta!”

After that, all the members of the group from the forest’s edge asked for seconds along with Welhide and Leeheim, which swiftly took care of the extras.

Meanwhile, only Marstein and Polarth asked for another serving of Timalo’s dish, which resulted in a good bit left over. Though the chef seemed to have finally regained his composure, his grin was now freezing up again.

“It isn’t our custom to leave any food left over, but still...” the Fou clan head whispered so quietly that only I could hear it. “It was all I could do to force down the portion of this dish that was served to me. For some reason, my chest feels heavy... If the nobles hadn’t eaten it too, I would think I had been poisoned.”

“I see...”

It was an onslaught of dairy in the form of milk fat, dried milk, and karon milk, which was apparently a harsh blow for the people of the forest’s edge. I firmly etched it in the back of my mind to pay attention to that when I was preparing dinner for them.

“Timalo and Asuta’s dishes were both wonderful. I’m certainly looking forward to seeing what comes next,” Marstein said with levity as he looked over

the crowd of guests, and all the varying emotions they now displayed.

4

“This is the vegetable dish I have prepared,” Timalo proclaimed as it was brought in, and instantly there was a stir among the nobles. Atop the plate wheeled in on the cart was a massive tarapa.

Tarapas were shaped like pumpkins but had the color of tomatoes. And this one was especially huge, so much so that you could carve it like a jack-o'-lantern and wear it on your head.

“To think that one could grow such a large tarapa. It certainly is a shock,” the Turan guardian Torst uttered in admiration.

But then, Polarth chimed in suspiciously. “When you leave tarapa be, they grow to about this size. However, as they get bigger they also grow more hard and sour, as well as less sweet.”

“Ah, right, tarapa are grown in the Daleim plantations.”

“Yes. At any rate, once they grow that large they require greater time and effort to raise further, at which point they shrink and wrinkle, packing in dense sweetness and acidity for a sublime flavor. But cultivating them for so long more than doubles the prices. As such, the sour tarapa that have grown to a reasonable medium are sold to the post town and farms, while the small and sweet ones are sold in the castle town. But normally when they are this size they're so sour as to prove inedible,” Polarth stated, his eyes sparkling with great interest as he revealed that unexpected knowledge. “Of course, I can't imagine a chef as renowned as Sir Timalo would serve us such defective tarapa.”

“No, of course not.” With the main meat course so close at hand, Timalo seemed to be fired up to recover lost ground. And with fingers that were surprisingly supple for a man his age, he gently grasped the tarapa's stem.

“This is a unique tarapa dish that I personally devised. It will be the first time it is presented to anyone outside of the house of Turan.” With that, Timalo pulled up on the stem, and the top of the tarapa came off like a lid. Inside there

was a pure-red vegetable stew. He must have scooped out the tarapa's insides, filled it with all the ingredients, and then carefully heated the whole thing over a low flame so it wouldn't boil down. Currently, the aroma of various herbs, vegetables, and boiled meat wafted into my nostrils.

Seems like he's real confident in that one.

Making a gourd into a bowl like that was certainly an interesting idea.

On my end, though, I had gone with yet another simple dish.

"This dish is made with boiled giba rib meat and vegetables."

If I had to give it a name, I suppose it would be cold giba shabu-shabu and heated vegetable salad.

For this dish, I went with giba rib meat. After boiling it until it grew soft, I washed it in water to remove the excess fat, making for a cold shabu-shabu.

As for the vegetables, I boiled tino, nenon, and aria until they softened, then for a bit of extra embellishment I added some of those fresh small tarapa packed with sweetness and acidity that Polarth had just mentioned.

For flavoring, I squeezed some lemon-like sheel juice and added it to tau oil, then sprinkled in some soup stock. In other words, I was trying to make something like ponzu.

I really did want to get the people of the forest's edge eating lots more vegetables, which was how I came up with this dish. With it, I kept the amount of rib meat low while really loading up on veggies. And during the taste testing, Vina Ruu and Granny Tito Min seemed to take a shine to it the most out of the members of the main Ruu house.

"Hmm, they both look delicious," Polarth cheerfully stated. Welhide and Leeheim looked troubled as to which dish to start with too.

In the meantime, the group from the forest's edge quietly ate my dish. If Dan Rutim were present, things would probably be a lot more lively, but on the other hand that would probably cause some serious trouble if he didn't like Timalo's dishes.

"Delicious! Both Sir Asuta's and Sir Timalo's!" Polarth exclaimed before

anyone else, ultimately having decided to alternate between the two dishes. “Sir Timalo, the herbs in your dish are sublime! And is this karon short loin? At any rate, the meat is delicious, and so are the vegetables! The acidity from the tarapa is wonderful too!”

“I am glad to hear it’s to your tastes... Normally there would be no use for such sour tarapa, but by using it as a container to wrap around ingredients like this, it creates a unique flavor by allowing the acidity to seep in.”

“I see, I see. Still, the tarapa used on the inside is the sort that was only raised to medium size, correct?”

“Yes. I believe the pairing of those two types of tarapa works best.”

“In that case, you must have discarded the insides of the tarapa you scooped out. That certainly is extravagant.”

At that, the Fou clan head’s eyebrows twitched. Currently, he was staring intently at the portion of deep red stew sitting on the clay plate in front of him. I was just about to ask him what was wrong, but then for the first time in a while Gazraan Rutim chimed in from the other side of the Beim clan head.

“This is certainly tasty. The aroma of the herbs seems a bit strong, but it’s a very rich flavor, I’d say.”

As far as I could recall, that was the first bit of praise anyone from the forest’s edge had given Timalo’s cooking.

I figured that would be just the thing to finally get Timalo fired up...but he just replied, “My thanks,” with a flat expression.

Does he just not care what the people of the forest’s edge think...?

If that was the case, then that really felt like an inappropriate attitude to have, but at the same time, perhaps that was better for the sake of his pride.

Still, this was a dinner party meant to foster goodwill. Guys like Gazraan Rutim and Dari Sauti would understand that praising the other side’s cooking was a good way to support that goal. However, the people of the forest’s edge strongly opposed the idea of lying. They just weren’t equipped to offer up flattery when they didn’t mean it. That was precisely why everyone had

remained so firmly silent up till now.

And yet Gazraan Rutim said it was tasty, so he must have truly felt that way. If it were me, I would have been so overjoyed I'd get a lump in my throat.

Well, Timalo wouldn't know anything about the people of the forest's edge though, so it made sense that he wouldn't be so moved. And as I stole a glance over at Gazraan Rutim, I found him shooting me back a very warm smile.

"Of course, your cooking was delicious too, Asuta."

It felt like he had seen right into my mind, so I couldn't help but feel a bit embarrassed.

I could already easily see that everyone from the forest's edge was enjoying my cooking by the way that they dug into it. Donda Ruu and Gulaf Zaza weren't exactly big talkers to begin with, but Gazraan Rutim and Dari Sauti must have realized it would be awkward to just keep praising my dishes, so they had kept quiet.

"Yes, your dish is quite tasty too, Sir Asuta! It is quite simple, yet the taste is simply fantastic. And the giba meat in particular is delicious! It has certainly left me anxiously awaiting the main dish."

Now that I looked, I saw that Polarth had completely cleaned both plates. In that case, it was indeed finally time to get the main dish ready.

"Well then, please excuse me for just a short while."

With that, Timalo left along with the pages, and I hurriedly followed after. We head chefs were supposed to put the finishing touches on our main dishes personally.

It seemed as if Timalo was trying to avoid talking to me, as he disappeared down the end of the hallway in a flash.

"I don't sense any animosity from the nobles, but that chef alone is burning bright with it," Ai Fa whispered to me as we walked. I couldn't exactly go and speak carelessly in front of the pages who were guiding us, though.

"Ah, Asuta, were there any issues with how the okonomiyaki turned out?" Reina Ruu asked, running up to me as soon as I stepped into the kitchen. Her

blue eyes were filled with a mix of unease and anticipation.

“They were perfect,” I replied, and a beautiful smile bloomed on her face.

“I’m glad to hear it. So, it’s finally time for the meat dish, isn’t it?”

“Yeah. I’m counting on all of you.”

Dividing up the labor, Reina Ruu, Sheera Ruu, and I each lit up a stove. From a slight distance away, Rimee Ruu cheered, “Give it your all!”

“How’s the dinner party going?”

“Hmm, there’s definitely some awkwardness here and there. Donda Ruu and the others aren’t exactly used to idle chatter during dinner to begin with,” I said with a shrug of my shoulders as I watched over the melting of the transparent lard. “But, well, my cooking seems to be earning a fairly favorable reception, so let’s firmly seal the deal with the last two dishes.”

I would give us a passing grade if we could at least end the day without any trouble. Marstein was acting so friendly that it actually made it hard to grasp just what he was really thinking, but I got the impression that Polarth, Welhide, Torst, and Leeheim really were taken with giba meat cooking. Now I just needed to pray I wouldn’t disappoint anyone with the main dish or dessert.

“All right, I’m off.”

After serving up the finished dish on a plate, I headed resolutely back toward the dining hall. For better or worse, the end of the dinner party was finally in sight.

When I arrived at the dining hall, I found Timalo already there standing by. And as I took my prescribed position, the other chef lifted the lid off his dish.

“My dish is karon cooked in a covered pan.”

Another, “Ooh,” resounded from the noble side.

There was a massive chunk of meat lying there imposingly atop the biggest plate yet. It must have been around sixty centimeters long, thirty centimeters wide, and ten centimeters thick. The cut narrowed slightly toward one end, and the impression I got was that he had used half of the entire torso of some smallish four-legged animal.

The surface didn't seem to be grilled but rather had an ivory-white steamed surface, and was thoroughly coated in an orangish sauce. Around it were shriveled little tarapa, chatchi, nenon, and numerous other vegetables I didn't even know the name of, with a variety of herbs on top. It really did make for quite the extravagant display.

"I used half of a young karon's torso. Allow me to start from the outer short loin," Timalo stated as he picked up a huge carving knife. The block of meat didn't seem to offer any resistance at all as he cut into it, and he was able to slice right through as if it were tofu or butter.

The cross-section of the meat revealed was a deep pink, and had a sort of viscous shine. Had he not removed any moisture from it? At any rate, it sure did look tasty.

"This dish is made by coating giba short loin in chatchi starch and frying it in giba fat."

Still, I wasn't about to admit defeat. To start with, I portioned out a fresh salad of finely shredded tino, aria, and nenon, then poured on a dressing with a sheel fruit and reten oil base. And then, I laid out the giba tatsuta age.

This dish was once again new to everyone but Donda Ruu. Ultimately I decided on using short loin for my cut, and prepared them slightly thick so they could be eaten in around two bites. I had chosen this one out of the numerous meat dishes I had on offer, but just how would it be received...? This was a real moment of truth for me, regardless of what Timalo presented.

With the presentation finished, the pages started handing out both of our dishes. Until they were done, everyone remained politely still.

"Ah, I'm once again at a loss as to which to start with. After all, the fried dish Sir Asuta made with kimyuus was already unmatched..."

Grabbing hold of a small dinner knife and a two-pronged metal skewer, Polarth looked back and forth between the two dishes.

"This meat..." Dari Sauti said, similarly holding a metal skewer as he lightly furrowed his brow. "It seems to be only half cooked. Is it really all right to eat?"

"Yes. It has been sufficiently heated through, and besides, karon meat can

even be eaten raw. There is no need to worry about such matters as you enjoy.”

Aside from the oddly wet and glistening shine, it looked very much like roast beef. And I had to figure such a direct use of meat would play perfectly with the people of the forest’s edge.

Now that I think about it, I heard Donda Ruu loved roast giba meat.

This wasn’t a cooking contest with Timalo. But still, if Donda Ruu were to happen to say Timalo’s dish was tastier, that would make my pride sting quite a bit... So though it was late in the game, I suddenly felt my heartbeat picking up the pace.

“Well then, let us eat.”

Marstein started off by stabbing his skewer into the karon meat.

With a thickness of two or three centimeters, it was quite a substantial chunk. Supporting it with the side of his knife, the noble lord carefully brought it to his mouth so the orange sauce wouldn’t slide off...and his eyes narrowed with satisfaction.

“This is...shockingly tender. It’s as if it’s dissolving in my mouth.”

You could make meat that tender by steaming it instead of grilling it? As I gulped a little, Timalo gave a graceful bow.

“I chose a young karon with especially high-quality meat, and put in plentiful time and effort preparing it in advance. Then I simply needed to take care with the heat of the flames, and I was able to create a dish so soft it can even be eaten by those without teeth.”

“Hmm... Still, there cannot be many who can make a dish on this level even here in Genos. I’d certainly like to have you man the kitchen in the castle at some point.”

“I am truly grateful for your kind words.”

At that, Timalo shot me a triumphant look.

As Polarth and Torst also tried the karon dish, they let out similar sounds of admiration.

And then there was the group from the forest's edge. Dari Sauti had grown rather silent over the course of the last several dishes, but seemingly unable to hold back any longer, he let slip a "Hrmm..." and said, "Asuta, I found it strange that you didn't make your giba cutlets for this event... But your skill truly is something else. I never would have dreamed you were still hiding away a dish that is every bit their equal."

"Ah, so it's to your liking?"

"Yes. Though my stomach already felt like it was about to start bulging out, I can eat as much of this as you can offer," Dari Sauti answered with a gentle smile.

"I am the same," Gazraan Rutim agreed from beside him. "My father Dan is sure to complain again when he hears I ate a dish such as this. Asuta, would it be possible to have you man the Rutim stove again in the near future?"

"Yes, of course."

Since they weren't the sorts to make overblown statements, their words left a deep impression on me.

As for the other four people of the forest's edge present, they all remained silent, but shoveled down my dish at an impressive speed.

Apparently, everyone on the noble side had begun with Timalo's dish, while everyone from the forest's edge started with my dish. The modest amount I served up to start with disappeared in no time at all, finally bringing us to the next step.

As they grabbed the dishes from the other side, the nobles generally looked full of anticipation, while the hunters of the forest's edge didn't show much emotion at all. And then, the nobles bit into the giba meat, while our side did the same with the karon. Personally, I couldn't help but feel more than a little nervous as I watched over the sight.

The meat I had used up till this point was either thinly sliced or minced. I had taken care to stay light on the amount of meat I used in the okonomiyaki and cold shabu-shabu so that it didn't overwhelm the other ingredients.

That was precisely why this one would be a true, full-fledged giba dish. If it

were poorly received, that would be like a denial of giba cooking itself.

As I stood there with bated breath, I heard a surprised shout of, “Ooh...!”

I looked in the direction it had come from, and found Polarth’s round face overtaken with indescribable delight.

“Delicious! Simply delicious! Sir Asuta, your skill is...” he started praising, but suddenly returned to chewing.

Even so, that was enough for me to breathe a sigh of relief. He wanted to keep eating my dish so much that he couldn’t even find the time to spare to applaud it. That alone was more than enough for me.

“This certainly is a surprise... Sir Asuta of the Fa clan, I have heard tell that you come from overseas, but still, just what sort of background do you have...?” Torst asked after taking his time to swallow down his first bite of tatsuta age.

“I was born in an island nation called Japan, where my father ran a small restaurant. He taught me how to cook from a young age.”

“Is that true? I thought for certain you must be a chef from some palace in the nation of the dragon god...”

“Definitely not! I’m nowhere near that important.”

“Hmm... Still, it is certainly quite unusual for someone so young to possess skills that can compete with Sir Timalo’s.”

Naturally, Timalo’s cheeks twitched at that statement.

Noticing that out of the corner of his eye, Leeheim broke out in a somewhat mischievous grin. “Sir Torst, I believe you go too far in stating his skills can compete. I believe we are bewitched by the novelty of the foreign cooking techniques employed by this Asuta chef.”

“Oh? Sir Leeheim, are you not impressed, then?”

“No, I have also firmly fallen under his spell. To be perfectly honest, I find this Asuta’s cooking to be remarkably delicious.”

Apparently this young noble lord wasn’t very honest with his feelings. Before Leeheim could continue on, though, someone else cut him off.

“Still, this meat dish is delicious, and I have no complaints about it. Nobody disagrees with that fact, correct?” Melfried chimed in, having remained firmly silent up till now.

Leeheim looked startled into silence, while Marstein smiled and said, “Oh? Well this is certainly a surprise. You never so much as twitch an eyebrow no matter what you eat, so I never expected such a statement from you. I believe this may just be the first time I’ve ever heard you give impressions on a dish, Melfried.”

“I do not care about the taste of food, be it good or bad...” Melfried replied, his eyes chilly like glass spheres. “Still, even if I do not care one way or the other, I can still tell the difference. This dish is delicious.”

“Yes, it is. Timalo’s dish is also first rate, but if I had to compare the tastes I would have difficulty determining a victor.”

With those words, Timalo finally froze in place, aghast. The color had drained from his face, and his slender shoulders had begun trembling. Marstein must have noticed that, but he still cheerfully continued on.

“At any rate, let’s continue pleasing our tongues. Asuta, Timalo, could you portion out what’s left of your dishes?”

“Of course.”

There was roughly half of each dish left, so it would be possible to dole them out equally to everyone. However, Donda Ruu then spoke up for the first time in a while in a solemn tone.

“Duke Marstein Genos... I’m grateful for your consideration, but I would like to refrain from eating any more of that dish.”

At that, Marstein turned his way and said, “Oh my. Sir Donda Ruu, is this karon dish not to your liking?”

“That’s right. If the customs of Genos say I must eat another portion then I suppose I have no choice, but otherwise, I’d prefer not to.”

With that, Gulaf Zaza and the Beim and Fou clan heads chimed in that they were of the same opinion. Timalo’s face was still quite pale, but he affected an

unconcerned expression as he sliced away at the meat.

“Oh-ho, so four out of your party of six weren’t pleased with it? My apologies for asking, but would you mind telling me exactly what it is that dissatisfies you with the dish...?”

“I just don’t like eating soppy meat when it’s not in a stew,” Donda Ruu replied, looking like he found the whole thing a pain. “That won’t change regardless of who cooks it. In fact, the first time Asuta of the Fa clan there manned our stove, I couldn’t think of his cooking as anything but poison.”

“I see. If you’re simply not fond of tender meat, then I suppose there’s no helping that. So, what about everyone else?”

“The toughness of the meat has nothing to do with it. I just get an unpleasant feeling in my chest when I eat this,” Gulaf Zaza shot back, sounding even more annoyed than Donda Ruu. And with a surly look on his face, the Beim clan head gave a big nod.

“I feel the same as Gulaf Zaza. Something felt wrong with the dishes I’ve eaten up till now too. It’s like there’s a hot, throbbing sensation running from my stomach to my chest.”

“Hmm... Is it some sort of ingredient that doesn’t agree with you, perhaps? And what about you?” Marstein asked with a smile, only for the Fou clan head to give a slow shake of his head.

“Neither of those reasons apply to me. I’m just not fond of the idea of eating meat on its own, without stew or vegetables or poitan.” And then, his eyes turned toward Timalo with a surprisingly sharp glare. “Chef of the castle town... You have all sorts of vegetables lined up on that plate there, so why didn’t you distribute them?”

Timalo still didn’t seem like he had recovered from Marstein’s evaluation, and now he turned and shot the Fou clan head a suspicious look.

“These vegetables and herbs are here to bring additional flavor to the karon meat. They’re placed out to lend a bit of garnish, but they’re something akin to cast-off husks and aren’t worth eating.”

“I knew it... In that case, that’s even more reason I don’t feel like eating it.

Leave it for those who want it,” the Fou clan head stated, then his gaze fell listlessly. “I went too far there. My apologies for my impoliteness.”

Marstein’s eyes narrowed even further with curiosity. “You have nothing to apologize for. But I would be grateful if you could tell me exactly why you feel that way.”

The Fou clan head didn’t meet his gaze, though, and again shook his head. “It’s nothing worth discussing. And I don’t believe it’s something that should be said in a place like this either.”

“This place was prepared so that we might be open and deepen our understanding of one another. Our lifestyles differ greatly, and as a result our customs can sometimes vary as well. Would you not agree that it is crucial we communicate with each other about such matters as well, rather than fearing misunderstandings?”

After a bit more staring straight down at the table, the Fou clan head replied, “It’s just... I can’t stand the thought of wasting ingredients in order to make a delicious meal. No matter how tasty it may be, I wouldn’t want to eat something like that.”

“Hmm. So it isn’t to your liking the way that the vegetables are used up to add delicious flavor to the dish, only to then be thrown away? Timalo, what are your thoughts on what Baadu Fou has to say?”

I was pretty surprised to hear Marstein say the Fou clan head’s full name there, considering I hadn’t even known it myself. And as Timalo handed off the slices of meat to the pages, he gave a bitter shake of his head.

“I suppose it can be summed up as a difference in thinking. With this dish in particular, a great deal of ingredients are needed to make the stock. And once the delicious flavors have been drained from them, the only thing left to do is discard them.”

“Hmm. And what do you think, Asuta? You were a foreign chef to begin with, correct?”

“I, well... Ever since coming to live at the forest’s edge, I’ve tried my hardest not to waste ingredients. After all, it didn’t take long for me to learn that was

the custom.”

For example, with the chatchi I squeezed to extract the starch, I fried it or boiled it to use in a different dish. Even with that strained, dry leftover chatchi, there was still a way to cook it up.

Ever since my first few days living with Ai Fa where I wasted multiple meals worth of poitan, it had been driven deep into my mind not to squander even the slightest bit of what was bought with the giba tusks and horns that she risked her life for. And even though I had started earning coins too, that core principle hadn’t changed.

“I see. That custom certainly does seem to differ between the castle town and the forest’s edge,” Marstein stated, only for a rather awkward silence to fall over the dining hall.

In the midst of all that, the remaining meat had been doled out bit by bit, and then eventually the plates left through the doors. We were finished with the main dishes, so at last it was time for the finale: the desserts.

“Lady Lefreya, if I recall correctly, you tend to prefer sweets over ordinary meals,” Marstein stated, looking straight at the girl for the first time.

Still staring off into the distance, Lefreya nodded. “Yes.”

“You seemed to have an unusually strong interest in Asuta of the Fa clan, so I am certain he must be well-versed in making sweets as well.”

Marstein’s tone was entirely nonchalant, despite how close he was brushing up to the touchy subject of Lefreya’s previous crimes. In response to his words, Gulaf Zaza shot the girl an intense glare, while Dari Sauti seriously furrowed his brow.

However, Lefreya just calmly replied, “Indeed.”

“From what I am told, making sweets requires entirely different skills and knowledge than ordinary cooking. You truly are incredibly skilled for someone your age, Asuta.”

“Not at all. To be honest, I’m not well-versed when it comes to making sweets. Both the other day and today, I ultimately had to rely on vague

recollections to timidly throw something together.”

“Oh? And yet if you managed to satisfy Lady Lefreya in spite of that fact, that certainly is a surprise.”

I couldn’t exactly go and add, “And then because Lefreya liked it, she kept on holding me prisoner,” in response. There was something I *did* want to add, though.

“However, I’ve prepared a different sort of sweet today than what I presented to Lady Lefreya. I hope that it will be to everyone’s liking, but still...”

“As you are not a vassal of the house of Turan or anything of the sort, Asuta, there is no need for you to attach such a title to my name,” Lefreya replied, a fittingly haughty look shining in her reddish-brown eyes for just the merest of moments. “I do not recall you properly referring to me by name in the past to begin with, however I ask that you simply call me Lefreya if possible, Asuta.”

“My sincerest apologies, Lefreya...” I replied, just in time for the pages to return.

“I apologize for the wait. This is a baked fuwano sweet using minmi,” Timalo stated as he lifted the silver cloche, his voice sounding steadily more exhausted. Beneath it was something that looked like a large square pancake.

It looked somehow moist and had bits of pink minmi fruit throughout... Chunks of the same sort of peach-like fruit I had once used when baking for Lefreya. As Timalo sliced up his dish, a truly sweet aroma filled the air.

What an unusual smell. There’s the aroma of baked fuwano, minmi, panam honey...and other ingredients I don’t even recognize, I thought to myself as I pulled off my own silver cloche.

“This sweet, it’s called, um...chatchi mochi.”

“Chatchi? You can make sweets using chatchi?” Polarth loudly questioned, clearly taken aback.

As I wondered if it ultimately looked like I was just trying to be eccentric, I nodded back, “Yes.”

What I had prepared was a chatchi mochi using chatchi starch. First I boiled

Jagar-produced sugar and chatchi starch together in water, and once it coagulated and grew transparent, I tossed it into water as cold as possible to cause it to solidify further, then chopped it up to suitable-sized bits. It was like a simplified version of a warabi mochi recipe.

As for flavoring, I naturally went with a sort of pseudo-mitarashi dango glaze made from chatchi starch, sugar, and tau oil. I regulated the amount of sugar in both parts, and ended up with a sweet that emphasized its squishy, jiggly nature. Though my old friend Reina was an expert in making sweets, the idea for this recipe actually came from the ones I recalled my mother making when I was little.

“My, it’s all transparent like a toto’s egg! Is this really chatchi? I cannot help but wonder what in the world you did to it to get it in such a form...”

“I squeezed the juices out of the chatchi and then dried them to make a starch. Once it’s in that state, it can be used like fuwano flour. You could also use it in baked goods, but I decided to go with this dish for tonight instead.”

Around when I decided on the giba tatsuta age for the main dish and also figured the giba soup prepared with tau oil could also fit, I hit on the idea of unifying everything together in the theme of Japanese-style cooking. That fixation wouldn’t exactly mean anything to the people of this world, but it just wouldn’t feel right to me personally, serving okonomiyaki, cold shabu-shabu and salad, and tatsuta age only to top things off with donuts or hotcakes.

On top of that, I just had trouble picturing the hunters of the forest’s edge wanting sugary sweets, so I figured I could at least give them a texture they could hopefully enjoy. And this was ultimately just me pushing my own preconceptions on them, but still, I felt like Japanese sweets were a better fit than western style ones for tough hunters like Donda Ruu and Gulaf Zaza.

“Hmm... This certainly is a mysterious flavor,” Marstein stated with great amusement, having gone straight for my dessert first. “All of your dishes have been made using unusual techniques, but this sweet in particular seems to surpass them all. This truly feels like the taste of a dish from a foreign nation.”

Well, it’s from another world entirely, rather than just another country... I thought to myself, but ultimately I just bowed my head and said, “I’m grateful

for such praise.”

After that exchange, the clearly bewildered Beim clan head questioned, “What is this dish? It was made using chatchi? It’s as if... No, I can’t even think of anything to compare the flavor to.”

“Right. To start with, there isn’t any pure sugar at the forest’s edge or in the post town, so the people of the forest’s edge not only have no custom of eating sweets, you didn’t even know that food like this existed in the first place. Because of that, this is the one dish I’m not really confident all of you will like, but still... What do you think?”

“Hmm...”

“Back in my home country, sweet desserts were especially enjoyed by women and children.”

Since there wasn’t any sugar to be had at the forest’s edge, I wasn’t able to make any test samples in advance. Still, Rimee Ruu seemed amused by the texture when the chatchi mochi were completed for the first time, and when she tasted them, she was so moved it seemed like she would be bowled right over.

Thanks to that, I got the impression that maybe it held true in this world too that women and children tended to be fond of sweets. At least, that was what I was thinking as the Beim clan head gave a displeased frown.

“This dish is liked by women and children...?”

“Well, that was the case back in my home country at least. Of course, there were still plenty of men and old folks who liked sweets too, though.”

“So there’s nothing shameful about a man liking it...?”

“Shameful...? No, of course not.”

“I see...” the Beim clan head responded, shoveling down the remaining portion left atop his plate.

Taking note of that, Baadu Fou stopped silently eating his own portion and turned to face the clan head beside him. “Ah, so you’re also taken with this dish, clan head of the Beim?”

“I didn’t say so much as a single word of the sort...”

Baadu Fou broke out in a very gentle smile. And I felt somehow warm inside as I compared that with the sour look on the Beim clan head’s face.

In the meantime, the noble side had started discussing my dish as well. I heard stuff like, “How mysterious,” and, “What an unusual taste,” so needless to say, they also seemed surprised.

And then something occurred that instantly silenced that lively discussion.

Gulaf Zaza wrung out in a bitter tone, “Lord Genos... I don’t have any real doubts as to your statement that you wish to reform the bonds between our people, and I agree that’s the right path to take. With that in mind, there’s just one thing I’d like to have your understanding on...”

“And what is that, Gulaf Zaza? I have no question as to the sincerity of your people.”

“In that case, could I have your pardon? I don’t believe I can eat any more of this dish,” Gulaf Zaza said in a grumbling tone, pushing the clay plate with the beautiful swirling pattern on it away from him. On top of it sat Timalo’s baked sweet, only a single bite taken from it. “This dish causes an even worse feeling in my chest than anything yet. What I ate feels as if it’s squirming around in my guts like some sort of living creature. It’s as if I gulped down some sort of poisonous insect.”

“Hmm... This baked sweet seems to use a significant amount of panam honey. Perhaps that sweetness is a touch too strong for you, Sir Gulaf Zaza,” Marstein calmly replied as he suddenly stood and pulled the Zaza clan head’s plate his way. Then he elegantly cut off a slice, and tossed it into his mouth without the slightest hesitation. “As you can see, it most certainly isn’t poisoned. It’s simply a flavor that is quite unsuitable for you. And we do not see it as rude to leave food uneaten, so there’s nothing for you to worry yourself over, Sir Gulaf Zaza.”

“It is seen as a crime at the forest’s edge for leftover food from a dinner to go to waste...”

“In that case, allow me to handle that matter,” Marstein stated, putting his hands and mouth to further work and swiftly finishing off the rest of the baked

sweet.

Reina Ruu had said one should refrain from eating from the same plate as someone who isn't even family, but naturally Gulaf Zaza raised no such complaints.

"Now then, it seems that more or less takes care of all the dishes. Personally, I found this to be a rather worthwhile dinner party. And I certainly hope it was the same for all of you as well," Marstein said as he wiped away the panam honey from his mustache with a white napkin-like cloth. "I would like to express special gratitude to Timalo and Asuta of the Fa clan for providing tonight's feast. The dishes both of them prepared were all splendid. Though Genos Castle employs a great many skilled chefs, I can't imagine either of you falling short of any of them in terms of skill."

"Thank you," Timalo and I replied, bowing our heads in sync.

And as he looked over the two of us, Marstein's gaze ultimately fixated on Timalo.

"Timalo, your cooking was exquisite. At the very least, I cannot imagine anyone from the castle town of Genos questioning your skills. Though you did not receive such praise from our guests from the forest's edge, that is down to differences in lifestyles and environment, and is nothing to be ashamed of."

"Quite so..."

"However, if you had intended to welcome our guests from the forest's edge, the results might have been different. I could sense that Asuta of the Fa clan wished to bring joy to both his comrades from the forest's edge and we nobles with his cooking, but I could not sense such a spirit from you."

Timalo listened in silence.

"You are an outstanding chef, even among those here in Genos. I realize I'm repeating myself, but on that point alone I have no doubts. I have even thought I would like to someday place you in charge of a banquet at the castle." And then, Marstein continued on in a bright yet firm tone, "However, you were unsuited for handling the kitchen for this dinner party. There is no need for you to feel shame, but I feel a great deal of responsibility for my own foolishness in

accepting your request and handing you the role... Well then, you shall receive your payment later, so could you leave this place now?"

With that harsh criticism from Marstein, the dinner party came to a close.

5

"Yummy! Your tatsuta age really is the best, Asuta!" Rimee Ruu excitedly proclaimed as she stabbed some of the dish with a metal skewer.

It was now half an hour after the dinner party, and we were in a small room next to the kitchen.

The nobles and the leading clan heads had stayed behind in the dining hall to continue their discussion. But since our role as chefs was over, we were finally able to have our late dinner along with the hunters who had been guarding us.

"I'm quite fond of this salad dish too. Eating boiled meat after cooling it in water makes for such a novel taste."

"Yes, I agree. But I think the sheel juice plays a huge role in making this so delicious. If you just boiled the meat and vegetables alone, it would feel lacking."

Perhaps due to the sense of satisfaction that came from completing such a big job, Sheera and Reina Ruu were both wearing even brighter smiles than usual.

All of the various dishes presented to the nobles were laid out atop the table. It seemed that being able to enjoy everything all at once really was more the style of the people of the forest's edge.

"Ah, don't just eat nothing but tatsuta age! I want to have more too!" Rimee Ruu complained at her brother.

"Quiet, you. There's still a whole ton left. Besides, if you eat too much you'll get all round like Mida."

"I won't eat *that* much. Stupid shorty Ludo!"

All of the members of the guard group were present. And since it was possible to bolt this room's door from the inside, they were able to take a break too.

Those young men and women of the forest's edge were gathered around the table enjoying a meal, sitting in chairs despite not being used to doing so. It was a pretty unusual sight, but also a heartwarming one.

At some point, Sheera Ruu used a break in her culinary discussion with Reina Ruu to put some okonomiyaki on a plate and offer it to Darmu Ruu.

"Hn," the young hunter awkwardly replied as he accepted the dish and bit into it. As Sheera Ruu watched over him, her expression looked both happy and pained at the same time.

"Not that it matters to me, but there seems to be an awful lot of your dishes..." a reserved yet displeased-sounding voice chimed in. It had come from an unusual guest, Roy. Right around now, Timalo's group must have also been eating dinner in another room, but he alone had asked to eat with us.

"It'll be like a funeral over there, so I wouldn't be able to properly taste anything I eat," Roy had said. He had also been stealing glances here and there at Reina Ruu as we ate, but, well, I decided not to question that.

"You still have this much left after handing half over to Timalo's group? Are you still going to have room for our dishes with that much of your food?"

"That's because we only offered up half of what we prepared for the chefs alone. The men of the forest's edge are big eaters, so we needed to make this much."

"I can tell that just by looking, but still... Also, what's the deal with that guy making the strange faces?" Roy asked the second half quietly.

As for where he was looking, it was at our other guest, Kamyua Yoshu. The man was shoveling down giba meat just as swiftly as the hunters from the forest's edge, and seeming like he was about to cry as he did so.

It had been so long that I had completely forgotten, but Kamyua Yoshu was the sort of unfathomable guy who could become as eerily expressionless as the Grim Reaper when worked up, while at other times he could look so emotional that he appeared to be on the verge of tears.

"Just when I thought Asuta's cooking couldn't surprise me again, every last one of these dishes just about knocks me out with how good they are," Kamyua

Yoshu said as he slurped down giba soup.

The people of the forest's edge tended to be unsociable toward anyone but their comrades, but they were hardly shy, so having outsiders around didn't bother them, and the harmony of the dinner table wouldn't be disturbed by having Kamyua Yoshu and Roy present.

For Rau Lea, he was seeing virtually all of these dishes for the first time, and whenever he took a bite he shouted out in surprise. Ai Fa and Darmu Ruu remained expressionless and silent, but they also ate faster than anyone. On the other hand, Rimee, Ludo, and Reina Ruu were excitedly chatting away with brilliant smiles, lending some liveliness to the proceedings.

There really was a much friendlier feel in the air compared to the dinner party. If his goal was to deepen friendship with the people of the forest's edge, Marstein really should have allowed women and young folks to attend too.

"So, what do you think of the taste of giba meat?" I asked after Roy finished giving each of the dishes a taste test, only for him to scratch his head with a sour look.

"It's definitely quirky, but it's not bad at all. I had expected something more like the taste of mountain-raised gyama meat."

"Huh? Gyama are animals from the eastern kingdom, aren't they? Do they have a really quirky taste when they're raised out in the mountains?"

"The meat just plain stinks. That's why people from Sym use powerful spices like chitt seeds to cover it up. When it comes to gyama meat and dried milk, the only stuff that can be sold in the west is what's been raised on the plains."

So apparently, the grass they ate on the mountains and plains differed and had an impact on the flavor of their meat and milk. The dried milk I was familiar with didn't stink at all, so it must have been made with the milk from gyama raised on the plains.

"This fried dish is even tastier than the one you made before with kimyuus... No doubt it's left Timalo at a loss for words."

"I'm sure Timalo's cooking is really something else too, though," I said, turning to face the small table off to the side. That was where Timalo's dishes

that Roy and the pages had brought along were sitting, waiting their turn.

“All right, I guess it’s time for us to give his cooking a try too. It’s cuisine from the castle town, just like you’ve been waiting for, Reina Ruu.”

“Ah, right!”

With that, she excitedly rose to her feet and hurried on over to the little table. Roy’s gaze immediately moved to follow, but he somehow forced himself to look away.

“But the guests from the forest’s edge didn’t like the dishes, right? And the duke gave him a pretty harsh scolding, so Timalo ended up pale as a corpse.”

“Yeah, pretty much anyone would be hurt hearing something like that. It was enough that I couldn’t help but wonder if he purposefully chose Timalo for the role to bring him down.”

“Oh right, you were there, huh? Still, I’d say that’s off the mark. Timalo didn’t do anything but try to make the best dishes that he could. I can’t even imagine what anyone didn’t like about them,” Roy replied with a sour look, his arms crossed.

By now, Sheera Ruu had also walked over to the other food table, while Rimee Ruu shouted, “You better not eat all of it!” and took off running.

“Hmm, they all smell kinda weird, don’t they!”

“Yeah. To start with, we don’t use so many herbs at the forest’s edge.”

We four chefs all seated ourselves around the small table. The hunters hadn’t shown any interest whatsoever in food from the castle town, so it was a taste test just for us.

However, the result was truly regrettable.

“Gross!” Rimee Ruu shouted at full volume.

What she had eaten was the fuwano dish, which was like some kind of oatmeal with cheese and herbs mixed in.

Just like the smell implied, it used a large amount of karon milk and plenty of herbs, and if I had to try to relate it to something, it was like chunks of torn up

bread were soaked in milk and then boiled with cumin and lemongrass. Then the Camembert cheese-like gyama dried milk was tossed in alongside bits of meat similar to beef sirloin. It was sweet, and yet also had a significant bite to it. Ultimately, it made for a real complicated flavor that was like some sort of hybrid between Thai and Italian cooking.

“Hmm... I can certainly see how this would give you a bad feeling in your chest if you ate too much...” Reina Ruu said. Her eyes had been shining with anticipation before, but now her eyebrows were clearly drooping.

The dish Reina Ruu had eaten was the soup dish that smelled of milk fat and herbs. On top of the butter-like milk fat, this dish also employed herbs akin to cinnamon, rosemary, and garlic chives. And Timalo likely also added plenty of those bouillon cube-looking things that were here in this kitchen. The smell and taste of the dish were both rich and intense.

The karon stomach used in it was white and slippery, but, well, it didn't seem like a bad ingredient as long as you didn't have an issue with entrails. Still, the flavoring of the soup overall was once again complicated and difficult to accustom your tongue to.

By Reina Ruu's side, Sheera Ruu went, “Hmm...” with a complex expression on her face. She had the karon meat dish that was the main course atop her plate.

Originally, the dish wasn't supposed to be part of the meals for the chefs, but since there were leftovers from the dinner party, it was delivered here. Once it was heated back up, the glossy karon meat gave off a delicious aroma. Ludo Ruu was the only one out of the hunters who seemed curious, and he jumped out of his chair and approached.

“I'm not interested in anything else, but that meat seems tasty. Cut me off a slice, Asuta.”

“Yeah, all right.”

Cutting into the hunk of meat that was as soft as butter, I sliced off a bit for both me and Ludo Ruu.

And when I took a bite...the karon meat really did break down easily in my mouth, as if it was melting away. However, it was more than just soft.

Unexpectedly, there was an explosion of oily content in my mouth, taking me aback.

“Gah, what the heck is this?! It’s just a sack of fat!” Ludo Ruu shouted, swiftly hurrying back to the large table and slurping down giba soup as a palate cleanser.

“Roy, could it be... Did you add extra fat to this meat afterwards?”

“Ah, I’m surprised you figured it out. We used these thin hair-like needles to poke a ton of holes in the meat, then soaked it in karon fat and steamed it together with herbs and vegetables,” Roy carelessly answered. “We never would have been able to get that level of tenderness and flavor otherwise. It took the longest amount of time to prepare as a result.”

“What point is there in getting the meat that soft? I’d say the karon meat in that fuwano dish was already plenty tender and delicious.”

“That’s because the karon bought from Dabagg is high quality. This is an effective method for making it even better than what you’d typically get. Honestly, I thought it was an amazing idea.”

The sliced karon meat gave off a gleaming deep-pink shine. It had the flavor of a delicious high-class beef, and the citrusy sauce drizzled on top wasn’t half bad either. Even though it was a roast, it was so tender it seemed to melt on your tongue. And the many herbs and vegetables used lent plenty of flavor to the meat.

However, I couldn’t help but feel that it had crossed some sort of line. I didn’t have much issue with any sort of junk food, but my stomach was protesting, shouting out that something was wrong and twisted. Just as Ludo Ruu had said, it was like gulping down a mass of fat.

“Do the people of the castle town usually eat such a high amount of fat? I can’t help but feel that taking in this much is going to be bad for your health...”

“Hmm? That’s because the count...er, former count had his chefs and restaurants use as much milk fat, reten oil, and karon fat as they pleased. Only nobles can possibly request a dish as extravagant as this, though.”

Had Cyclaeus made himself sick by only ever eating stuff like this? There was

just so much oil and salt in the dish that I couldn't help but think that.

"Ah, this dish isn't bad," Reina Ruu chimed in as if to smooth things over.

It was the deep-red boiled vegetable dish consisting primarily of tarapa. It must have been portioned out of that massive tarapa that served as a container. Currently, a very small amount of it was sitting there in an ordinary metal bowl.

I went ahead and gave it a taste test too, and sure enough it was pretty darn good. The stock was made carefully from a variety of vegetables, and though the aroma of the coriander-like herb was a bit strong, the taste seemed fairly close to that of minestrone.

Personally, I would have gone just a bit lighter on the salt, and I wouldn't use that herb either. Other than that, though, I had no complaints.

"There's panam honey and sugar in that dish too. Apparently he was extra careful with the amounts so as not to ruin the flavor," Roy stated in a stiff tone.

"I see," Reina Ruu replied, clapping her hands together. "I thought there was some sort of flavor I didn't recognize besides the herbs in there. Panam honey and sugar are those ingredients used when making sweets, aren't they?"

With Reina Ruu looking straight at him like that, Roy was thrown off balance for just a moment.

"That's right! Do you have some sort of problem with that?!" He snapped.

"That wasn't what I was trying to say... If I hurt your feelings, then I'm sorry," Reina Ruu said with a bow of her head, moving on to the next dish. I also noticed that Roy looked to be at his wits' end, but I ultimately refrained from talking to him about it.

"Asuta..." a voice called out, accompanied by a tug on the sleeve of my T-shirt. It was Rimee Ruu, looking up at me with tears in her eyes. Atop her plate sat that baked fuwano sweet that was cut into a square. "This... 's gross..."



“Huh? It took you down too, Rimee Ruu?”

Gulaf Zaza was one thing, but nobody could match how Rimee Ruu just exploded with joy when I brought out the sugar back in the kitchen. It was definitely something of a shock for her to show such resistance to the dessert.

In terms of appearance, it looked like a mille-feuille or something, with numerous thin layers of fuwano, and didn't seem gross in the least. It appeared to have a really moist texture, and the pink color from the minmi fruit was adorable. Honestly, it wouldn't look out of place at all if it was on display in a pastry shop in my old world.

“It certainly looks delicious though... Well then, guess I'll dispose of the rest. Ah, but is it all right for me to eat your leftovers when we're not family?”

“That's only the custom for when one is over ten and no longer a child.”

“Whoa, you scared me there! What's up, Ai Fa?”

“I'm done with dinner. All of the dishes were delicious.”

As she stood there behind me, Ai Fa stared suspiciously at the baked sweet atop the plate. From what I could tell, she had finished up before everyone else, while the other hunters' hearty appetites were still raging.

“That's certainly an odd dish. It doesn't smell bad, though.”

“Yeah, and it looks pretty tasty. Do you want to give it a try too, Ai Fa...?”

“I have no intention of eating food made by such an impolite man.”

“I see. Well then, looks like it's up to me to finish it off after all.”

As I patted the still-crying Rimee Ruu on the head, I took the wooden plate from her. And when I tossed a bit of it in my mouth...I immediately understood why the young girl hadn't liked it. There was the flavor of some sort of liquor in the dish, a kind of brandy or something.

It might possibly have been the same stuff as that high-class fruit wine that Balan had given me. There were then numerous herbs and fruit juices blended into the dough, so it was a bit difficult to say for certain, but at any rate it definitely had an alcoholic base.

Each and every one of the thin fuwano layers had absorbed plenty of panam honey and karon milk. That made it extraordinarily rich and sweet, and then it had the fruit wine scent about it on top of that, giving the taste much more of a punch than you would expect from looking at it.

“Hmm, well...I’d definitely say you’d need some perseverance to get it all down.”

“You sure are harsh. So much so that I’d call you crazy if I hadn’t tasted your cooking,” Roy chimed in, apparently having recovered from his previous self-inflicted damage. “It’s true that the dishes you made definitely wouldn’t lose to Timalo’s. That certainly is amazing, but I really don’t think that Timalo’s dishes fall that far short... You used light seasonings and hardly any herbs in your cooking, and there are plenty of folks in the castle town who would be dissatisfied with that.”

“Right. That’s why Duke Genos said neither my cooking nor Timalo’s was better or worse. And I don’t have any objections to that evaluation. But...”

“‘But’ what?”

“But in the castle town...or rather, in your cooking and Timalo’s, I’d say you’re going overboard on the seasonings. It feels like your main focus is on how many herbs and oils and dairy products you can pack in without ruining the flavor... Am I mistaken, though?”

“Hrmm... I wouldn’t say that’s particularly wrong, no. Actually, I’d say that’s pretty much what cooking is all about, right?”

“That isn’t how my father taught me. I was taught to use seasonings efficiently to bring out the best in the ingredients.”

“That’s...” Roy started to retort, but then he held his tongue, a troubled look on his freckled face. “I’m only nineteen, but I was invited here to the Turan manor after working at three different restaurants. Each time I moved to a grander workplace, the amount of ingredients and seasonings on offer grew... And it was driven into me that a chef’s skills came from how well they could use them.”

“Right, I can understand that much.”

“Then what is it you *can’t* understand? In a dinky shop, you can only use a dinky variety of ingredients. And in a first rate restaurant, you have plenty of first rate ingredients to make first rate meals, as a first rate chef. That’s what I’ve been taught...”

“Hmm... That certainly is a different way of thinking compared to back where I come from. If you have some high-class meat, then I figure the tastiest way to eat it may just be simply grilling it up.”

“Then why do you bother frying or boiling giba meat? You’re confident in its flavor, aren’t you?” Roy shot back, making a face like a sulking child.

As I scratched my head, I offered him a grin.

“Why is that, I wonder? Giba meat is delicious, so I think it’s at its tastiest just by rubbing in salt and pico leaves and grilling it. So I may just be wasting my time racking my brain, trying to come up with something that can match that flavor.”

“As if that could ever be true,” Ai Fa interjected, jabbing me in my side. “There’s no need for such pointless concerns. It will make me quite angry if you start doing nothing but grilling meat for dinner.”

“I’m not exactly concerned about it. I intend to keep on straining my brain every day from here on out, so go ahead and look forward to what I come up with.”

“Hmph,” Ai Fa snorted, just in time for a knock on the door.

“Coming,” Kamyua Yoshu replied for some reason, hurrying on over. After removing the bolt, slightly opening the door, and exchanging a few words with the person outside, the aloof bodyguard turned my way. “Asuta, it seems Cyclaeus is finally awake. If we let this chance slip by, he likely won’t wake till tomorrow morning, so could I have you get to work preparing his dinner?”

“Yeah, that’s fine.” At last, it was time for my final task. “Well then, Reina Ruu, I leave the rest to you. You don’t have to force yourself to finish all of Timalo’s cooking though, all right...?”

“Right. Take care, Asuta.”

Ai Fa ended up being the only one to accompany me, after stopping the others when they moved to stand.

The first step needed to be reheating the food in the kitchen. With that in mind, I exited the room along with Ai Fa...and found an incredibly unexpected crowd standing there.

“Hey there. Sorry for the hassle, Asuta.”

The sight of the person standing at the head of the group left me at a loss for words. Of all people, it was Duke Marstein Genos himself who had been speaking with Kamyua Yoshu from the other side of the door.

Behind him were Melfried, Donda Ruu, and Lefreya, as well as Sanjura sandwiched between two ducal guards.

“Sir Donda Ruu will be accompanying us to act as a witness. Once this task is finished, all of today’s work will be complete. I’m counting on you, Asuta.”

“Understood...”

And so I faced my final task, fists clenched tight.

6

Cyclaeus was being confined on the highest floor of the central building. Apparently, that place had been the bedroom of the former head of the house to begin with.

After passing through the door watched over by ducal guards, we first stepped into an empty antechamber. When it was later at night, the guards would take turns resting in here and keeping watch. And it was here that Marstein once again turned our way.

“Asuta and Lady Lefreya will deliver the food. We will also enter the room, but if a crowd of this size were to appear before him at once it would put Cyclaeus on edge. Instead we will lie in wait behind the partitioning screen or the like.”

The group present consisted of me and Ai Fa, Marstein and Melfried, Donda Ruu and Kamyua Yoshu, Lefreya and Sanjura, and two soldiers, for a total of ten. Perhaps as an extra precaution, Sanjura’s arms were bound, and the

leather strap attached to the bindings was held by one of the soldiers. As he stood there bound, Marstein's gentle gaze turned his way.

"This is likely the last meeting you will be allowed before the trial... Sanjura, do you still not have any new statements you wish to make, even at this point?"

"That is correct," Sanjura replied, staring back at Marstein with an equally gentle look.

"In that case, why did you ask to accompany us to this place, even knowing it would require such treatment? Perhaps you desire to offer a final farewell...?"

"No. I simply wish to stay, by Lefreya's side."

"Is there not a different way entirely that you could shoulder Lady Lefreya's pain and suffering?"

"No. There is no evidence, regarding that matter. But if there were proof, perhaps I would have chosen, that path."

"Do you refer to that idle gossip that Sanjura is my older brother...?" Lefreya interjected, her voice incredibly quiet. "Where did such a wild rumor even come from, I wonder. Sanjura is simply an attendant my father hired, paying him for his services."

"Sanjura himself confessed it to the people of the forest's edge. After that, we investigated, and were able to determine that your father was housing a woman from Sym in Dabagg up until just four years ago."

Lefreya shot Sanjura a suspicious look. However, he just wore his incredibly familiar gentle smile in response.

"My mother did not speak of the matter, before she died, and so I do not, know the details. However, I was raised to swear, my loyalty to Cyclaeus."

"Hmph... But at some point, you decided to swear loyalty to me rather than my father."

"Yes. I now offer myself, in your service, Lefreya."

"Then none of this matters either way. However, I have no intention of calling a man 'big brother' after having him as an attendant for years, you know."

“Of course. I am your humble servant, Lefreya.”

At that, Lefreya faced away, her short chestnut colored hair swaying along.

And after watching over that exchange along with everyone else, Ai Fa called out, “Duke Genos. It may be presumptuous for me to make such a request, but would you allow me to stay by Asuta’s side in order to protect him?”

“Hmm? If I recall correctly, you are Asuta’s clan head Ai Fa, aren’t you? You needn’t worry, since there are two ducal guards watching over Cyclaeus already. He may not even have the strength left to stand anymore, but we can’t let him harm himself.”

“But even though his illness was surely more severe than Cyclaeus’s, Zattsu Suun bit and tore through the throat of a Jeen man, set fire to the Dom settlement, and used giba summoning fruit to launch an assault on Kamyua Yoshu’s group. No matter who you are up against, I feel it’s best to never let your guard down.”

“Don’t worry. Melfried trained the ducal guards to always remain vigilant.”

Ai Fa looked a bit pained and bit her lip. And when he saw that, Marstein once again smiled.

“You’re that concerned for your family member? Very well. I’m certain Cyclaeus won’t be driven mad by the addition of a beautiful woman such as yourself. You may protect Asuta alongside the ducal guards.”

“I’m truly obliged...” Ai Fa said with a little bow of her head. All the while, Donda Ruu remained silent.

“Well then, shall we enter? Cyclaeus is quite weakened, so take care not to get him unnecessarily worked up.”

With that, Marstein shot one of the soldiers a look, and the man reached out for the door.

At their direction, we passed from the dim lighting of the antechamber into an even gloomier bedroom.

Though it was a rather large room, the only candles lit were the ones on the inner wall. And then on top of that there was a massive partitioning screen, so

the majority of their light was obstructed too.

Marstein's elegant finger pointed, indicating the other side of the partitioning screen. With a nod, I pushed the cart carrying the meal further into the room. Ai Fa, Lefreya, and I continued on into the darkness, and eventually we reached a large bed.

To either side of the bed was a ducal guard in white armor, standing still as a statue. And lying atop it was a small man.

There was a thin blanket pulled up to his chest, and he was half buried in the soft down bedding. It was the former owner of this manor, Cyclaeus.

His face had a sickly, bruised look to it, and was coated in cold sweat. His arms hanging over the blanket were frighteningly thin. It had only been half a month, but Cyclaeus had shriveled up like a monkey's mummy or something.

"Lefreya...is it...?" his dry, scratchy voice wrung out from his deathly pale lips. "If he sent you...then that accursed Marstein has finally made up his mind to execute me, eh...?"

"You will surely have a trial before any execution. That is the law of Genos, is it not?" Lefreya quietly replied, now standing beside the bed. "I simply came to bring you your meal... For today, I had your dinner specially prepared by Asuta of the Fa clan, the visitor from overseas living as a person of the forest's edge."

Cyclaeus's nearly closed eyes then vacantly turned my way.

That venomous shine in his gaze had now completely vanished into the shadows. Instead, there was a faint light gleaming at me, like the bioluminescent shine of fading sea sparkle out on the nighttime ocean.

"Asuta of the Fa clan...? What sort of plot is this, exactly...?"

"It's no plot at all. I just made dinner for you at Lefreya's request."

Marstein surely had some sort of motive of his own here. But I didn't know the truth of that, and I got the feeling that it didn't really have anything to do with the essence of my job here.

"Lefreya asked me to feed you my cooking before you're imprisoned. Do you have the strength left needed to eat it, Cyclaeus?"

“My body will no longer accept any food whatsoever... At last, my illness of many years has bared its fangs... No matter how I may struggle, my life is surely at its end...”

“How gutless of you, father. Where is the man who lived a greedier life than anyone?” Lefreya asked, her voice having regained an ever so slight tinge of emotion. “From what I am told, you have committed a great many crimes. You coveted power and influence badly enough to push aside countless others, did you not? If you give up on everything at the very end, then just what sort of life did you even live?”

“Who can say... I simply grabbed hold of whatever strength I could... And with my death, I part with all of it... That is ultimately all a man’s life amounts to...”

“And what purpose was there to the authority you gained, at the cost of leaving mother and myself isolated and alone? Why did mother have to die such a lonely death?” More and more of the haughtiness Lefreya bore in her voice and the look in her eyes was bubbling forth. “I only ever had mother, and mother only had me. And so when mother died, I was left all alone. You neglected mother and me, used underhanded methods to amass a fortune, and gathered up more ingredients than you could ever possibly eat, but did that bring you happiness, father? I...I was not happy in the least...”

Cyclaeus offered no response.

“Even so, you are still my father... And even if you did not care about me in the least, I am your daughter. That is why I have arranged this final parting meal for you,” Lefreya stated, suddenly shooting me a glare. “Now then, I shall have you eat Asuta’s cooking, father. I can portion off the contents of this pot onto a wooden plate, correct?”

“Yeah,” I replied, removing the lid.

Instantly, the stagnant air in the room filled with the aroma of giba soup.

Gripping a ladle, Lefreya awkwardly scooped some onto a plate.

“What sort of farce is this...?” I could spy a gloomy flame flickering in Cyclaeus’s eye, through the gap between his eyelids as thin as a cut from a knife. “Dragging out not only my daughter, but even Asuta of the Fa clan... Just

what is that damn crafty Marstein thinking...?”

“I told you, Duke Genos has nothing to do with it! I asked Asuta for this favor tonight of my own volition! Even if Duke Genos is plotting anything beyond that, it has nothing whatsoever to do with me!” Lefreya finally exploded with emotion. Still holding the plate, she bent over and glared right into her father’s face from up close. “Why not at least look at me now, in our final moment together? We’ll surely never be able to meet again, you know. You will be locked up in a prison, while I will be confined to this manor!”

Again, Cyclaeus was silent.

“Asuta, my apologies, but could I have you sit father up?”

“Ah, yeah. Got it.”

Slipping by the ducal guard, I approached, then slid my arm between Cyclaeus’s body and the bed. Ai Fa lent me a hand like it was only natural, but his body was so light that wasn’t even necessary. As I supported his body that practically felt like a cast-off husk, I slid in a pillow behind his back, sitting him up against the headboard. With that, I stepped back, while Lefreya moved in close with the plate and a wooden spoon in hand.

“Now then, even if you have grown weak, you should still at least be able to swallow soup, correct? If nothing else, it should certainly be less agonizing than drinking down those pungent, bitter medicinal herbs. As a final parting gift, eat the cooking prepared by this man from overseas, Asuta.”

She scooped up a bit of cloudy soup and thrust it toward Cyclaeus’s mouth. After staring at Lefreya’s angry expression for a bit, the man slowly parted his lips. And then, the end of the spoon disappeared into that dark abyss.

“It is delicious, is it not? There is simply no way that Asuta’s cooking could be anything but. After all, the food he prepares exceeds even that of Timalo, who was the former assistant head chef at the Turan manor,” she murmured, seemingly urging him on as she brought another spoonful of soup to her father’s mouth. And then, she shot me another frightening glare. “Asuta, this dish is all broth, and there doesn’t seem to be anything else in it at all.”

“That’s because you just scooped from the top without stirring it at all. You

need to whip it around first and then serve it onto the plate.” I took the plate from Lefreya and demonstrated.

“You should say such things to begin with,” she shot back, puffing her cheeks as she snatched the plate back and scooped up a spoonful of ingredients. That included a chunk of ivory-white boiled giba meat, as well as some bits of transparent aria.

After she put it in Cyclaeus’s mouth he listlessly chewed...and then started trembling.

“What...What is this dish...?”

“This is a soup made using giba meat. I thoroughly boiled the giba thigh meat and aria together, then simply adjusted the flavor using rock salt and pico leaves,” I calmly responded. “It’s tasty, right? This was the first dish I made after being entrusted with the Fa house’s stove. Giba is a high-quality meat, so just boiling it is enough to get this much of a broth.”

“Giba meat...? Of all things, you fed me giba meat...?”

“Is it in any way inferior to karon or kimyuus? I certainly don’t think so. Tastes may vary from person to person of course, but I don’t feel it comes up short as an ingredient.” It wasn’t as if I was especially trying to reform Cyclaeus or anything. I was simply saying what I wanted. “Even with so few ingredients, you can still make a meal this delicious. And I believe what you needed wasn’t luxurious gourmet dishes, but rather meals like this one filled with plenty of nourishment.”

“What are you...?”

“Pretty much everyone the whole world over may have an interest in eating tasty food, but that’s exactly why I don’t agree with the idea of meals that will ruin someone’s body. And considering you’re suffering from an illness of the internal organs, I believe you should have thought even harder about what sort of meals you needed.”

I was fully aware that nothing would come of me saying this now. Even so, I couldn’t leave it unsaid.

A man only interested in fine dining had gone so far as to commit crimes in

order to gather wealth and power, using that to purchase expensive ingredients to harm himself further... What sort of happiness was there to be had from such a destructive lifestyle?

While spreading unhappiness to others, he had also plunged forward toward his own ruin. It really was utterly ridiculous. That went for Cyclaeus...and Zattsu Suun too.

“You seem to be under some sort of misconception, Asuta of the Fa clan...” Cyclaeus replied as he looked at me, his eyes like a will-o’-wisp on the verge of flickering out. “I found pleasure in gourmet dishes alone... And there is no point to a life without pleasure, so I...”

“I don’t care about what brought you pleasure or the like, since it doesn’t change what I’m saying. Is my cooking not to your tastes, Cyclaeus...? You don’t need a fortune to make a good meal. With just meat, aria, and a pinch of salt, you can make a dish on this level. And what could be happier than sharing that with your precious family, gathered at the same dinner table?”

Cyclaeus didn’t answer.

“You look down on the people of the forest’s edge as barbarians, but I can tell that they’re living happy lives. Maybe these words won’t mean anything to someone born into nobility like you, but still...I don’t believe delicious food is something you can obtain just by paying money.”

Cyclaeus’s mouth firmly shut.

In irritation, Lefreya gave a single stamp of her feet.

“Never mind all that. No matter what you say at this point, everything is already over and done with. Just let my father journey to Selva believing until the bitter end that he was correct.”

“Yes... Everything is indeed over... But my soul is dripping in vice, so it will surely be shattered to bits before Selva...” Cyclaeus’s lips weakly trembled as they formed a mysterious grin. “I have no intention of concealing anything at this point... And I do not care to try laying the blame wholly on Ciluel either... I committed countless crimes alongside my brother... The number of lives lost to our plotting surely eclipses a hundred...”

“That’s not what I want to hear, father.”

“No, but listen, Lefreya... And Marstein too... I am sure you are listening to me from somewhere nearby, are you not, Duke Genos...? I no longer have the strength needed to raise my voice, though, so I am sure it must be difficult picking up what I am saying from a distance...”

At that, a number of figures appeared in the darkness. And the slender man at the head of the group then jauntily strode over to the bed.

“I had no intention of intruding on this father-daughter chat, you know. Do you have something to discuss with me though, Cyclaeus?”

“I do... But before that, there is something I wish to ask... Now that Ciluel is being held, who is the militia being entrusted to...?”

“The second battalion leader is currently serving as the acting head of the militia. It is a rather unprecedented assignment, but we could not entrust future affairs to the vice militia leader or the head of the first battalion as they had ties to the house of Turan, albeit distant.”

“That was some keen insight, but it still is not enough... If you do not dismiss the vice militia leader and heads of the first and fourth battalions, there will still be the potential for more trouble to arise... Those three shared in our crimes, after all... If you leave them be, they could cause problems down the line...”

“Half of the heads of the militia were complicit in your wickedness? Were you all plotting to eventually use force to compel the ducal house of Genos to surrender to you?” Marstein asked in a perfectly calm voice.

“Who can say...” Cyclaeus replied, still wearing that same mysterious grin.

“Then, the ones who dressed in the attire of the forest’s edge and pillaged the Daleim plantations like bandits were members of the militia? I certainly pray that wasn’t the case.”

“Of course they were not... No matter how much Ciluel may order it, the vice leader and battalion heads would not sully their own hands so blatantly after climbing the ranks... No, that was the work of ruffians currently in hiding in the town of Behett...”

“Oh? So you really did hire ruffians then?”

“We did indeed pay them coins... However, that was not all... They are all criminals who escaped execution...”

“Criminals who escaped execution, you say?”

“Five years ago, the militia captured a bandit group known as the Winds of Black Death... Though they were handed death sentences, Ciluel used his influence to free them, at which point they became a group we entrusted with covert operations...”

“So your crimes went that far? Granting freedom to criminals set for execution is utterly unforgivable,” Melfried harshly stated from beside Marstein. “Still, if they were handed death sentences through a trial, that punishment should have been properly carried out. I cannot see how it would be possible to allow them to escape without the prison officers noticing.”

“Then I would assume those prison officers were also paid off... If you wish to know the details, you would have to ask Ciluel...”

“I see. I will most certainly do so.”

At that, Melfried held his tongue, but there was a chilly light shining away in his grey eyes.

“Goodness...” Marstein muttered with a shrug of his shoulders. “The former head of the house of Turan, the militia leader, vice leader, and two battalion heads, and then prison officers and criminals who should have been executed. To think I would be saddled with so many criminals all at once... This can all be placed firmly at my own feet, though.”

“That is certainly true... Still, the first of these crimes began thirty years ago... So perhaps the blame lies with my father for failing to sever the accursed Turan bloodline...”

“Oh? You go so far as to acknowledge the murder of the first son and head of the house of Turan before you?”

“I do... However, there is just one thing I wish to say on that matter...”
Cyclaeus replied, an intense blaze now shining in his eyes despite the fact that

he was still seated listlessly in the same position. “The one to murder my father and older brother was Ciluel... He and I should be judged equally for all our countless crimes after those... But as far as those abominable crimes from thirty years ago, Ciluel plotted them out and did the deeds all on his own... I beg that you believe me on that one point alone if nothing else...”

“Hmm? But when your father and brother were returned to Selva, you became the head of the house, Cyclaeus. If it was Ciluel’s plot, would he not have also murdered you as the second son?”

“Ciluel... While he was born into the house of a count, he lamented his position as one doomed to live a life in the shadows, and hated my father and brother due to his desire for power... As I was also set to live a life of obscurity, he did not have such feelings toward me...”

Cyclaeus’s pale eyes were now flaming intensely. They used to have a venomous look in them, and just a little while ago they seemed on the verge of flickering out, but now the look in them was as fierce as that of the hunters of the forest’s edge.

“On that night...a year after my elder brother lost his life when falling from a topos, my father passed from an unidentified illness... And then, with the smile of a madman, Ciluel told me that the fortune and authority of the house of Turan was now ours... Even without that implication from Kamyua Yoshu, I knew full well... The one who murdered my father and older brother was the youngest son of the accursed Turan bloodline...”

“And then with that younger brother of yours, you committed countless wicked deeds in search of even greater fortune and power, Cyclaeus? Could it be... Are you saying if you had not become his ally, you worried you would suffer the same fate as your father and brother?”

“Even if that were the case, it does nothing to change how much I have dirtied my own hands... Genos’s laws do not permit taking the lives of others in order to protect yourself, correct...?”

“Hmm, that certainly is true... Still, why bring up that matter from thirty years ago now? No matter how severe those crimes may be, it wouldn’t be possible to find any evidence at this point, so I cannot see any real purpose to discussing

the matter.”

“There is no proof... That is precisely why I can only ask that you believe me... Even though I have committed numerous crimes, I did not commit the vile deeds of murdering my own father and brother...”

Cyclaeus’s eyes slowly moved. Still blazing bright, they stopped when they reached his daughter.

“Lefreya... My daughter... The cursed blood of the house of Turan flows through your veins... Your father and uncle were unforgivable criminals, while your other uncle and grandfather were helpless fools... Perhaps that accursed blood is what led you to committing the crime of kidnapping at so young an age...”

“My blood has nothing to do with it. I—”

“Listen well... Despite all that, you mustn’t cast away that blood flowing in your veins... You must keep on living for a long, long time, as the daughter of a criminal...” Cyclaeus practically groaned, reaching out his arm. His terribly thin fingers grabbed hold of Lefreya’s hand, causing the spoon she was gripping to fall onto the bed. “However...the house of Turan will surely lose its fortune and authority... But perhaps that misfortune will in turn grant freedom to your soul... One without a sword cannot cut anyone, after all... I celebrate you losing that blade... Thanks to that...”

Cyclaeus stole an ever so brief glance my way.

“Thanks to that...perhaps you shall become the sort of person who can find happiness from just a pinch of salt...”

“I cannot say I truly understand. After all, I was an insignificant, tiny person to begin with,” Lefreya stated with an angry look, wrenching free of her father’s grasp.

Then, she picked up the fallen spoon and slurped down a mouthful of giba soup.

“It may be lacking and plain, but it is perfectly delicious... If you cannot find happiness in such a meal, then you truly are an unfortunate man, father.”

“Yes... Your father was a truly unfortunate, terribly foolish man...”

Biting her lip, Lefreya glared at her father for a while, then said, “Duke Genos, there is still quite a bit of food left. Could you allow me to be alone with my father until this meal is finished?”

“I don’t mind. I’ll have the ducal guards on watch step back to the door.”

With that, Marstein turned around, and Melfried and Donda Ruu followed after him.

Nodding to Ai Fa, I also went to move away from the bed, only for Lefreya to quietly call out from behind, “Asuta?”

“Yeah?”

“Thank you...”

“Right.”

After one last look at the small girl nestling close atop the bed, I exited the room.

It was a near certainty that I would never see Cyclaeus again.

I was certainly in no position to even consider forgiving the man. After all, crimes such as causing the death of Leito’s father and Milano Mas’s brother-in-law and driving Zattsu Suun to madness were utterly unforgivable.

But still, even so, I couldn’t help but feel glad to have spoken to him on this night.

“Well then, go ahead and proceed as such...”

“At once.”

In the antechamber, Marstein and Melfried were quietly having some sort of conversation.

Melfried then swiftly exited the room, and Marstein turned toward Donda Ruu.

“We are moving to immediately detain the vice leader of the militia and the battalion heads, as well as dispatching soldiers for Behett. There’s a chance those criminals once set for execution have already fled to some other land, but

we should at least be able to find some traces to follow up on. And if we can clear away all the traitors in one fell swoop, that should help everyone sleep at least a little easier.”

“Let’s pray that’s the case...”

“Right. As the ruler of Genos, I promise to spare no effort in fulfilling this task. Well then, it’s about time for me to get going...but since it seems like a good opportunity, allow me to add just one more comment,” Marstein stated with a cheerful smile, staring up at Donda Ruu, who was around half a head taller. “I have a fondness for strong people. Perhaps it is only fate that Cyclaeus attempted to force the people of the forest’s edge to yield and threaten my standing. Despite being born the mere second son of the small Turan house, he managed to climb as far as he did on talent alone, with no concern for appearances. And if nothing else, that’s certainly something.”

Donda Ruu just silently listened.

“And yet, he ultimately fell before your people and Kamyua Yoshu. I’m quite fond of you all, Donda Ruu. You people of the forest’s edge are extraordinarily strong. And it makes me proud being able to call folks so brimming with strength my comrades.”

Even still, the leading clan head didn’t chime in.

“To be perfectly honest, I didn’t have any interest whatsoever in the people of the forest’s edge until this incident came to light. You obediently followed the unjust orders placed upon you by the lord of Genos eighty years ago, and Cyclaeus ended up holding the reins to do as he wished with you. Though you had the strength to hunt giba, you seemed cowardly when dealing with other human beings... That’s what I thought.”

Though Marstein was grinning away, Donda Ruu remained expressionless.

“But ultimately, it seems that your people are strong and proud. And I would certainly like to have you all continue to wield that strength as citizens of Genos from here on out. I hesitate to be so open about my feelings in front of my son or vassals, so I’d like you to go ahead and convey that to the other leading clan heads too. And Asuta of the Fa clan...” Marstein stated, turning my way. “I caused you quite a bit of trouble as well. Though the head priests may frown on

it, regardless of what your background may be, I would like to welcome you as a citizen of Genos. I hope that you will continue living in this land as a person of the forest's edge."

"R-Right. Thank you."

"And your cooking truly was delicious. I realize I can't go constantly summoning you to the castle town, but I would love to have you use your skills for me every now and again. At any rate, though, take care."

With one last look at my face, Marstein shot me a big smile and then took off after his son.

Kamyua Yoshu then added a wink and followed after, leaving just me, Ai Fa, Donda Ruu, and Sanjura plus the two guards who restrained him.

"What a ridiculous ruler..." Donda Ruu grumbled, finally grinning. It was the daring smile of a hunter. "But if his words meant that we should grab hold of happiness through our own strength, then that's just fine. We'll see it through in our own way."

That grin seemed to say he thought of Marstein more as a worthy opponent than a ruler.

But at any rate, Sanjura then stepped in front of me.

"Asuta, I would also like to, give you my thanks. You saved, Lefreya."

"Ah, I didn't do anything worth thanking me over."

"No, your presence saved, Lefreya...and perhaps even Cyclaeus, as well."

There's no way that's true, I thought to myself.

If Cyclaeus was saved by anything, it was by finally starting to walk a path that had always been there.

And though our paths were completely and utterly different, we met for just a brief moment, only to grow distant again. That was surely all it was.

"Well then, how about we start heading back too...?" Donda Ruu said, moving toward the room's exit with a swish of his hunter's cloak.

Though she had remained silent the whole time, Ai Fa now turned to me and

said, “Good work, Asuta.”

“Yeah, you too, Ai Fa.”

With that, we left behind the city of stone and returned to the settlement at the forest’s edge.

Epilogue

Five days after that, it was the fifth day of the ashen month.

“Ashen” felt like a strange name for the month, but apparently it was because the one before was the white month, while the one after was the black month.

At any rate, it was the fifth of the ashen month. On that day, Ai Fa and I were finally given permission to return to the Fa house. Thanks to the efforts of Melfried and his men, the grandiously-named bandit group, the Winds of Black Death, had been captured at last.

Supposedly the traitors in the militia also admitted to the crimes Cyclaeus had brought up. And Cyclaeus himself also finally recovered from his illness and was transferred to Castle Genos. Tomorrow, his trial would at last begin. What awaited him was ultimately either execution or a life of imprisonment. Marstein had given his firm promise to the leading clan heads of the forest’s edge that he would not face any punishment lesser than that.

Once that trial was over, Zuuro Suun and Bartha’s crimes would also be judged. Though, it had already been privately decided that Zuuro Suun would face ten years of penal servitude, while Bartha would be granted a pardon.

It would still be some time till we could say everything was truly over. However, at least for now, we had finally been able to reclaim our everyday lives.

“Man, I’ve missed all this so much that I feel like I’m gonna start crying...” I said as I worked to prepare dinner on the Fa house’s stove. Ai Fa had returned from hunting just a little while ago, and she was currently sitting a bit removed with one knee raised.

I had been kidnapped by Lefreya back on the fifth of the white month. And so, it had been a full month’s time since I had last returned home. Though we briefly dropped by a couple times to take care of some business here and there, and Ai Fa and I had of course spent plenty of nights with just the two of us in

the Ruu settlement, I really couldn't help being so moved.

Of course, Ai Fa had stopped in once a day to manage the pantry, so nothing had notably changed here in the Fa house. And during the day, members of the Fou, Sudra, and Deen clans had stopped in to say hello, keeping things lively. The Ruu settlement had also become a precious, comforting place for me too, but the Fa house really was still my home.

"Then tomorrow, we'll be able to reopen the stalls for business too. Of course, we can't let our guard down until the trial is over, but it really does feel like we're finally getting back to our everyday lives."

The arrangement ended up being that the ducal guards and Kamyua Yoshu would help protect the stalls. This time around, it really did seem that all of the criminals had been arrested, but Marstein proposed that we should keep bodyguards with us at least until the trial was over, just to be on the safe side.

"The soldiers will keep an eye on the stalls from a bit of a distance, while Zasshuma or I will accompany you to the inns. So none of you have anything to worry about as you do your work," Kamyua Yoshu had said.

Once the trial was over, the aloof bodyguard was set to leave Genos for a while.

"I have to see Sir Welhide to Banarm, then I figured I'd journey all around the western territory after looking for work there. I mean, I dedicated over three whole months to this task, so I've really been itching to spread my wings." Those words from Kamyua Yoshu clearly hinted that this whole incident was heading to a close. And then, that wanderer with his mysterious purple eyes and grin that put me on edge added, "I'm certain we're approaching the point where the standing of the people of the forest's edge in Genos is going to be reevaluated. Your fates were twisted out of sorts by Cyclaeus, Ciluel, and Zattsu Suun, and the time has finally come for them to be straightened back out. As I travel near and far, not a day will pass when I don't think about how everyone will have changed and how they'll be living when I next visit Genos."

I figured it was just as Kamyua Yoshu said.

All of the misunderstandings were getting cleared up. The disquiet between the nobles of Genos and the people of the forest's edge had been wiped clean,

and those many, many crimes had been brought into the light of day. So now was when things truly got rolling.

Even with the criminals all dealt with, the people of the forest's edge remained rather insular, and they still lived under a different set of morals and laws than the townsfolk. Just what sort of bonds should they have with the people of Genos...? That question was finally being asked again for the first time in eighty years.

But ultimately, what I could personally do was very limited.

"We may see all sorts of different ingredients start flowing into the post town too. If that happens, there's a good chance the food on offer at other stalls and inns will improve by leaps and bounds. I'll have to work hard to develop new dishes so that I don't fall behind."

"I'm certain you'll carry out your work just fine," Ai Fa said with a dead serious look on her face, but then her eyebrows drooped just a bit. "But for now, concentrate on the task at hand. I'm so hungry I can hardly stand it..."

"Ah, right, it'll be ready soon, so hold on for just a little longer!"

The light streaming in through the window had taken on a reddish tinge. Ai Fa had caught a large giba today, which she returned home carrying while coated in sweat. And then she had to skin it and dissect it too, which left her unusually fatigued.

Apparently she was having to head pretty far into the forest lately, as the number of giba in the area had decreased. And she said in a few days, she would have to enter a break period.

"Now that you mention it, aren't the members of the Fou and Sudra discussing if they should take a joint break period?"

"Indeed. Up until now, the clans had each decided on their break periods separately. But the Sudra clan head has suggested that it could prove convenient to have nearby clans align their breaks." It may have been subconscious, but Ai Fa rubbed her taut stomach with her right hand as she said that. "The clans in this area are the Fa, Fou, Ran, Sudra, Deen... And one more with blood ties to the Deen."

“Ah, I think they’re called the Liddo? I haven’t had any interaction with them yet though.”

“Indeed. The idea is that those six clans should take a break period at the same time. But the Deen and Liddo are subordinate clans to the Zaza, so that plan would require Gulaf Zaza’s approval.”

“Ah, but the Zaza clan’s located really far away. I can definitely see the logic to valuing distance over blood ties in that case.”

Back when the Suun clan was in charge, even if you came up with such an idea you wouldn’t exactly be able to bring it up. But the people of the forest’s edge had started to change too. No one used to pay any attention to small clans like the Fa or Sudra, but now their words were being valued, and the stage was being set so that they could openly exchange opinions with the leading clan heads.

Both Genos and the settlement at the forest’s edge were sure to face various reforms from here on out. Just how would they change after overcoming the crimes of their brethren...? As I was one of the elements that brought it about, I had a strong desire to see things to their conclusion.

“All right, it’s ready! Sorry for the wait, Ai Fa. But now, it’s time for the first dinner in the Fa house in a month.”

“Indeed.,” Ai Fa replied with a firm nod as I laid out the plates. Following the example set by the Ruu clan, I had gone ahead and grabbed more tableware for the Fa house too.

We each had our own soup and meat dishes, there were large plates for the fresh vegetable salad and baked poitan as well as little plates to portion them out onto, then handmade chopsticks, metal skewers, and wooden spoons for each of us. The food itself hadn’t really changed much, but it still made for quite a sight.

Ai Fa muttered off her pre-meal chant. She seemed to trace over her lips, before picking up a spoon. And then, she went, “Hmm,” with a serious expression on her face as she looked over the dish in front of her.

“It’s hamburger steak...”

“Yeah, it is.”

If I went and unveiled a different dish instead at this point, she probably would have strangled me.

On top of that, today was actually my first time trying out this variation. The brilliantly shining reddish-brown sauce drizzled on top was a sort of demi-glace I had made using a variety of vegetables and milk fat, and it was accompanied by sautéed chatchi, nenon, and aria heated carefully over a low flame. My goal was to achieve the sort of hamburger steak flavor I was most accustomed to.

“This’ll be the first hamburger steak in a month, so eat to your heart’s content.”

“Right.”

Maintaining a dead serious look on her face, Ai Fa grabbed hold of the plate with the hamburger steak. And as I slurped down the giba soup made with tarapa rather than tau oil, I stealthily observed.

After slicing off a single bite with her spoon, Ai Fa expressionlessly brought it to her mouth...and then her eyes opened wide in shock. They told me that she was no longer perfectly calm as she stared at the cross section of the hamburger steak.

“Asuta, this hamburger steak...”

“Yup. I tried adding some dried milk inside. I call it a dried milk-stuffed hamburger steak.”

“Didn’t you use up all of the dried milk some time back?”

“Well, actually, I secretly had Kamyua buy some of the excess dried milk from the Turan manor for me yesterday. After all, I’ve heard they have a real problem over there of having so much stock they don’t know what to do with it all.”

Ai Fa’s favorite meal had been hamburger steak with Camembert cheese-esque dried milk on top. And so I thought to add it inside the patty rather than on top as a bit of a surprise. I couldn’t imagine the demi-glace-style sauce was in any way inferior to the tarapa and fruit wine sauce either.

“I gave this dish a lot of thought, so I hope you like it.”

As Ai Fa chewed the meat and dried milk, she somewhat restlessly looked back and forth between me and the plate in her hand.

Eventually though, she reluctantly set the plate down, leaned forward swiftly, and then started rustling my hair.

“It’s delicious.”

“Thanks, glad to hear it.”

As I thought about how I was no longer going to let stuff like this shake me, I smiled back at her.

But then, Ai Fa took the soup from my hands and sat it down gently on the floor, before she circled around the food, moved over my way, and hugged me tight.



“It’s delicious.”

“I-I got that, already! Hurry up and eat already before everything gets cold!”

“I will.”

After squeezing me for exactly five seconds, so tightly it felt like my bones would shatter, Ai Fa returned to her own spot. Then, she carefully scooped up the gooey dried milk spilling out of the patty and popped it up into her mouth alongside the meat and chatchi.

“It’s delicious...”

“Yeah, glad to hear it.”

“I will tell you more later...”

“What do you mean, ‘later’?! ”

“The food is cooling right now, after all.”

Ai Fa’s expression hadn’t shifted all that much, and yet she still looked incredibly joyful.

Her beautiful blue eyes were sparkling brightly like a child’s. And the blue stone jewelry I had once given her as a present was dangling in front of her chest, shining like a third eye.

Just how would Genos and the forest’s edge change from here on out? I wanted to live here together with Ai Fa, watching as this world shifted around us.

With such feelings planted firmly in my heart, I picked up my plate to have some of that specially-prepared hamburger steak.

Intermezzo: The Harmonious Rutim Clan

“The sun’s getting pretty close to setting... Guess that dinner party in the castle town will be kicking off soon, eh?” the Rutim clan head Dan Rutim remarked.

He was in the main house’s kitchen, where Ama Min Rutim was preparing dinner along with her sister-in-law, Morun Rutim. Since they were tackling a somewhat elaborate dish, they were more restless than usual as they worked away.

“Just what sort of dishes are Asuta and the girls planning on serving? Agh, just thinking about it has my stomach rumbling!”

Dan Rutim was just standing there in the doorway, talking to no one in particular. Normally the men didn’t go near the kitchen very often, but since he finished the day’s giba hunt early, Dan Rutim had apparently visited in search of someone to talk to.

“If I had been selected for guard duty, I’d get to eat the same stuff too... Ugh, why was Donda Ruu so mean to me, his friend of many years?”

“I wouldn’t say he was being mean or anything of the sort. He was simply respecting the custom of the forest’s edge that either the clan head or their heir should remain to protect their home,” Morun Rutim replied with a smile as she stirred the contents of the boiling pot.

She was Dan Rutim’s daughter, age fifteen. And she was quite a cute girl, with a plump yet truly healthy appearance. Though she could be just as intense as her father when angered, she rarely ever got mad, and had a kind and gentle temperament.

“But at that meeting with the nobles, both Gazraan and I were allowed to leave the house. So why do I have to be ordered to hold down the fort now?”

“That was because the situation with the meeting was so dangerous that they absolutely needed your strength, wasn’t it? But things are peaceful with the

nobles now, so there's no need to drag you along."

"They still brought along four hunters as bodyguards though, didn't they? So it should have been just fine for me to come along too."

"Goodness, you're being stubborn... Did you really want to eat their cooking that badly, father?" Morun Rutim asked.

"Of course!" Dan Rutim replied, puffing out his thick chest. "Chances to eat Asuta's cooking don't come around that often! So obviously I'm unhappy with having one of those precious chances snatched away from me!"

With a, "Hmph," Morun Rutim smiled at her father. "We've been working as hard as we can to make dinner for our family, and yet you're unhappy with that? How sad."

"Ah, no, it's not like I have an issue with your cooking... What I'm saying has nothing to do with that."

"It certainly sounds like it does. What do you think, Ama Min?"

Naturally, this was just some light jesting between family members. And so, Ama Min Rutim smiled and chimed in, "Let's see... We've been training too, but we're still a long way from Asuta's skill level. And so I suppose we'll have to work even harder so as to not be so disappointing to our clan head."

"I'm telling you, that's not what I'm saying. Are you two being mean to me now too?"

"Like I said, no one is being mean to you, father. We'll be handling the finishing touches shortly, so could you just wait patiently in the main hall?"

At that, Dan Rutim exited the kitchen, grumbling as he went.

Normally the man was practically cheerfulness personified, so he was surely yearning greatly for Asuta's cooking. Despite the fact that he was a skilled enough hunter to stand equal with Donda Ruu, Dan Rutim really could be quite childish.

"Goodness, father really is noisy when it comes to Asuta's cooking. Well, not that I can't understand."

"Right. Asuta really is a wonderful cook, after all," Ama Min Rutim replied as

she transferred the meat that had been marinating in a sauce made from tau oil and fruit wine to a plate.

It had already been over two months since Ama Min Rutim had married into the Rutim clan. Naturally she thought of her husband Gazraan Rutim as family now, but the same went for his little sister Morun Rutim, his father Dan Rutim, and his grandfather Raa Rutim.

“We’re finally reforming our bonds with the nobles, and that’s something to be happy about. I couldn’t stop worrying when they brought father along before, though...”

“Yes, that’s for sure... I really was relieved when everybody returned to the forest’s edge safe and sound.”

“That certainly was a rough day. And we all had to gather in the Ruu settlement because we didn’t know what the nobles might try to...” Morun Rutim started to reply, but somewhat unnaturally stopped partway.

“What’s the matter?” Ama Min Rutim asked.

“It’s nothing,” Morun Rutim replied, her plump face flushing as she shook her head.

“It certainly didn’t look like nothing... Did something happen back then?”

“No, I’m telling you, it’s nothing!” Morun Rutim insisted, her face turning even redder.

And when she saw that, Ama Min Rutim finally remembered something.

“Now that I think about it, the hunters from the north also came and gathered in the Ruu settlement on that day, didn’t they?”

Morun Rutim didn’t reply.

“It was my first time seeing any of them, but they all seemed like splendid hunters. They were every bit as dauntless as the men of the Ruu clan, just like you’d think after hearing of their reputation.”

“Y-Yeah, maybe...”

On that day, Morun Rutim had talked with one of the hunters from the north.

And back then, she had worn the same look on her face as now.

What was his name again...? Ama Min Rutim wondered. He was even bigger than Donda Ruu and Dan Rutim, and since he wore a giba skull atop his head he must have been a hunter from the Dom clan.

Did she fall for that hunter, perhaps?

Still, the Ruu and the clans from the north had been at odds for many years. Even though they were trying to reform their bonds after the fall of the Suun clan, neither were the sort to forge such bonds lightly, especially not through blood. If Morun fell for a guy like that, she would definitely have a lot of hardship ahead of her.

Is that why Morun won't just come out and say it? Still, I don't feel like the clan head or Gazraan would just flat out object from the start or anything.

In some ways that might have made it harder to speak up, though. The Rutim fell under the Ruu while the Dom were under the Zaza, so joining together like that risked causing significant trouble for even their parent clans.

I'll have to give Morun my support whenever she decides to talk about it, Ama Min Rutim concluded, shooting the younger girl a smile.

"It certainly has gotten dark out, hasn't it? Let's hurry up and get this giba meat ready."

"Y-Yeah, right," Morun Rutim replied with a relieved grin.

The twilight streaming in through the windows only made the light from the flames in the kitchen seem all the brighter.



Not long after that, dinner was ready.

As they carried it into the house's main hall, Dan Rutim excitedly called out, "Ooh! So it's finally done?! I've been starving here!"

"We're bringing the rest of the food now, so please hold on just a little longer."

Since Gazraan Rutim had accompanied the leading clan heads to the castle

town, today there were only four members of their house present. The former Rutim clan head and current elder Raa Rutim was seated there beside his noisy son, and was just as quiet as always.

“This main hall sure does feel big when Gazraan’s not around! Come to think of it, isn’t this our first time eating without him?”

“That’s true. Last time both you and Gazraan left together, and it felt even bigger then, father.”

She was referring to the night before the meeting attended by the leading clan heads. Back then, both Dan and Gazraan Rutim had dinner at the Ruu settlement.

“You know, you ate Asuta’s cooking back then too, didn’t you? We haven’t had a proper chance to try it since Gazraan and Ama Min’s wedding banquet, though.”

“What, you’re still mad, Morun? Like I said, I’m not unhappy with your cooking. Of course not,” Dan Rutim retorted with a childish frown. And as she shot him back a smile, Morun Rutim sat down in her spot. Then, Ama Min Rutim kneeled down next to her.

“Well then, here is your long-awaited dinner.”

“Right! We give thanks for the blessings of the forest, and we offer our gratitude to Ama Min and Morun, who manned the flame and gave us our life for this night!”

It was certainly unusual for someone to give such an energetic pre-dinner chant. And so, Ama Min Rutim couldn’t help but smile as she also recited a chant of her own.

“It sure seems like there are a lot of plates today! And I don’t think I recognize this dish...”

“Right. It was our first time making that one. Go ahead and see if it turned out properly.”

“On it!” Dan Rutim replied with a grin, pulling over that wooden plate. As they ladled out soup from the metal pot, Ama Min and Morun Rutim stole glances

over his way.

With a totally unsuspecting smile, Dan Rutim took a hearty bite. And as he chewed away, his already big eyes opened even wider.

“Morun, wh-what is this dish...?!”

“Ugh, don’t talk with your mouth full. Swallow it properly first.”

With an odd “grup” sound, Dan Rutim kept on moving his mouth. He seemed to be thinking that he wanted to ask his question as soon as possible, but also that he didn’t want to waste this bite by swallowing without properly savoring it first.

Around when his soup was placed in front of him, Dan Rutim finally loudly exploded, “What *is* this dish?!”

“What do you mean? It’s a giba dish, of course.”

“I can tell that much! But this...this is just as tasty as those giba cutlets!”

“I see. Sounds like a big success then, right?” Morun Rutim said with a joyful smile, turning to face Ama Min Rutim. And when she did so, the girl nodded back with much the same expression.

“That’s a dish called tatsuta age. Just like with the giba cutlets, it’s made by frying with giba fat.”

“Ooh! I didn’t see this dish even at the big dinner at the Ruu settlement!”

“I believe this dish was created after that. After all, Asuta perfected it for today.”

Dan Rutim excitedly took a second bite, savored it fully, gulped it down, and then turned again toward Morun Rutim.

“Then, the leading clan heads and those nobles are eating the same dish right about now?”

“Yes, or at least that’s what Asuta said he planned on. That’s why we went to the Ruu house to learn how to make it too.”

Asuta was currently staying at the Ruu settlement. And the Rutim women had been heading there for a while now for cooking lessons, so they were able to

study directly under him these last few days.

“This dish requires more time to prepare than even the giba cutlets. First you need to turn chatchi into powder, and that’s quite an undertaking. But in return, it’s quite tasty, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, it’s delicious! So much that it’s an even match for Asuta’s giba cutlets! There isn’t any sauce over it, so why does it have such flavor?”

“That’s because we soaked the giba meat in a marinade in advance. And I think it would be tasty squeezing some sheel juice over it too,” Ama Min Rutim replied, at which Dan Rutim vigorously nodded his head while chowing down on giba tatsuta age. And just as Asuta had instructed, he was eating plenty of shredded tino along with it.

“Make sure you eat the other dishes too. We prepared all this for you, after all.”

“Hmm? For me?”

“Yup. Today’s dishes are the same ones Asuta made in the castle town. This is cold shabu-shabu, and this is okonomiyaki.”

Even the soup dish was the same giba soup prepared with tau oil. They didn’t have enough chatchi starch for that chatchi mochi dish that Asuta called a “sweet,” and he also made an “appetizer” by chopping up raw gigo. They also didn’t have the ingredients for that “mayonnaise” that Asuta added over the okonomiyaki, but other than that, they had recreated the meal that Asuta had made in the castle town.

“Of course, Asuta’s a way better cook, but this should cheer you up at least a little, right? Ama Min and I worked real hard on it, you know!”

“It’s delicious! These dishes are unbelievably tasty!” Dan Rutim said with a hearty chuckle as he looked over the two of them. “But why did you hide all this? If you thought I was being a pest, then you could have shut me up by just telling me in advance.”

“But wasn’t it more enjoyable because we kept it a secret till you ate it?”

“Yes, and if we got your expectations up beforehand, you could have ended

up being let down.”

“As if I could ever feel let down by such delicious food! You two really have grown skilled!” Dan Rutim declared with a grin of true satisfaction. It was such a smile of pure bliss that it seemed to wipe away all the day’s hardships.

With a happy grin of her own, Morun Rutim turned to face the untalkative elder of the clan.

“There weren’t any dishes you had a problem with, were there, Grandpa Raa?”

“No, they were all delicious.”

The elder Raa Rutim was a tall and lean old man. His white beard dangled down to his chest, and underneath his high eyebrows his sunken eyes shone with a piercing glare. Aside from the bald head and tall frame, he really didn’t look at all like his son Dan Rutim.

“Still...even someone who knows nothing of manning the stove such as myself can tell how much effort you put into these dishes. It almost makes it hard to remember the age when we only slurped down poitan stew.”

“Right?! I feel like I’m on the verge of forgetting there ever was such a time!”

“And yet, I lived that way for nearly sixty years... That’s not something that can be forgotten in just a few months.”

At that, Dan Rutim shot his father a puzzled look.

“What’s the matter, dad? You don’t have some sort of issue with the delicious food Asuta brought to us, do you?”

“Of course not. Rather, since Asuta of the Fa clan was welcomed as one of our people, life here at the settlement has undergone a shocking amount of change. I certainly never could have imagined our fellow people of the forest’s edge cooking dishes and selling them to the townsfolk.” It was rare for the untalkative elder to say so much. Instinctively, Ama Min Rutim sat up straight. “And there’s the matter with the Suun clan too. For many years, we built up our strength in order to eventually take them down, but it’s no exaggeration to say that Asuta’s presence brought them to an end.”

“And what could be better than accomplishing that goal without the need for any bloodshed?! Just what are you upset with, dad?”

“Like I said, I’m not upset about anything. It’s just...for an old man like me, this much change can’t help but feel dizzying,” Raa Rutim replied, staring off into the distance. “I have deep gratitude toward Asuta for saving the elder Jiba Ruu. And for bringing our people greater strength and joy through his delicious cooking. Such drastic changes may be too much for an old fool like me to handle, but Asuta is an irreplaceable asset for us all.”

“What fainthearted words! If you go saying stuff like that, you really will end up growing old and decrepit, dad!” Dan Rutim remarked with a hearty guffaw, slapping his father on the back. Dan Rutim was the only one in the whole settlement at the forest’s edge who could treat the elder Raa Rutim like that. “You should share in this joy and keep on walking alongside us! Even after eighty years of life, Jiba Ruu has regained so much of her vitality now, right? Elder or infant, we’re all equals as children before our mother forest!”

“Hmph, so you’ve got no intention of letting this bag of bones rest, then? You sure don’t hold back, you know.”

“That’s because I’m your son, dad! There shouldn’t be any holding back with your precious family!” Dan Rutim proclaimed as he took a slurp of soup. “It’s only been three months at most since Asuta arrived at the forest’s edge, hasn’t it? And yet he’s been able to bring about so much change! I’m sure things will be even more enjoyable a year down the line, or five, or even ten! It’d be a waste if your soul returned to the forest before you could see what’s coming, dad!”

“That’s true. You should live a long life like Jiba Ruu, Grandpa Raa,” Morun Rutim chimed in, leaning forwards and placing a hand atop her grandfather’s withered knee. Closing his eyes, Raa Rutim nodded, “Indeed.” And as she watched over that sight, Ama Min Rutim was once again overwhelmed by how blessed she felt to have married into this house.

Even on days like this when her precious husband was absent, she could still have such warm, pleasant experiences. And the reason she was able to enjoy such happiness was surely because everyone had come together to bring down

the Suun clan and those wicked nobles.

Just what sort of lives will be living one, five, or ten years down the line...? I'm sure there will be changes that I can't even imagine.

However, Ama Min Rutim didn't feel any worry or doubt in her heart. No matter what changes awaited her, she had so many comrades walking that same path alongside her. And so, surely, what lay ahead was hope and joy.

"Anyway, that's enough talking! We've got all this food in front of us, so let's dig in before it gets cold!" Dan Rutim proclaimed, thrusting his now empty soup plate toward Ama Min Rutim.

As she accepted it, she chuckled back, "Right."

Afterword

You have my deepest thanks for picking up this book, the 13th volume of *Cooking with Wild Game*.

I know I say the same sort of thing every time, but it's thanks to all of you that have chosen to pick up this series that I've been able to make it to this many volumes. And so, allow me to respectfully offer my thanks.

As I mentioned in the last afterword, this volume wraps up the Conspiracy arc that has been ongoing since volume one, and starting next volume a new arc will kick off.

While I was writing I didn't have any names planned out or anything, but I suppose if I had to call it something it would be the Development arc.

Just what sort of fate awaits Asuta and the people of the forest's edge now that they have cut themselves free of the Suun clan and Cyclaeus? I would feel incredibly blessed if you choose to keep on watching how business in the post town, interactions with the townsfolk, and the changes for the settlement at the forest's edge all play out.

This is a bit of a digression, but on the day I published the first chapter in this volume in the web version, it was the one year anniversary since I started posting it. It really is moving to think how over two years have already passed since then.

At any rate, for the occasion, I held a commemorative character popularity poll. As for the results, Ai Fa took first place, Ludo Ruu was second, and Dan Rutim was third. Then from fourth place onward were Asuta, Shumiral, Rimee Ruu, Reina Ruu, Shin Ruu, Kamyua Yoshu, and Gazraan Rutim. It really was a bit of a surprise to find out that seven male characters made it into the top ten.

And it was also a shock that Dan Rutim took third. It really did make me glad to find that a bald, portly man in his forties could prove so popular. Up until the end, he really was competing with Ludo Ruu for second place. Personally, I was

getting quite excited while tallying up everyone's votes.

Naturally, Dan Rutim is one of the characters I'm especially fond of too.

Still, in my initial plans I hadn't placed too much importance on the Rutim clan, so it was like Dan and Gazraan Rutim managed to earn their positions in the spotlight as I kept on writing.

On top of that, I decided to write about the harmonious Rutim clan for the bonus chapter this time around.

Unfortunately the focus ended up being on a night when Gazraan Rutim wasn't present, but they surely spend every night having such warm and friendly exchanges.

The web, novel, and now manga versions are all continuing on at the same time, so I've been going back and forth throughout various time periods of the story. In the story itself there is a gap of several months between the parts, and there have been all sorts of changes in the relationships between characters and the circumstances surrounding the forest's edge, and seeing it all laid out is also really moving for me.

On top of that, seeing Asuta and Ai Fa's meeting drawn out in the manga had a powerful impact on me too. It truly was fresh seeing Ai Fa act so coldly toward him. And I'm sure even she could have never imagined the explosion of comments that have come in from fans over these past several months.

The conspiracy the settlement at the forest's edge found itself wrapped up in may have come to a close, but there are still plenty of changes coming for Asuta and everyone else. I hope you'll continue to look forward to them all the way through to the end.

As always, let me finish by giving thanks to my editor at Hobby Japan, my illustrator Kochimo, everyone else involved with the production of this book, and of course all of you who purchased it.

I hope to see you all again with the next volume!

January 2018,

EDA





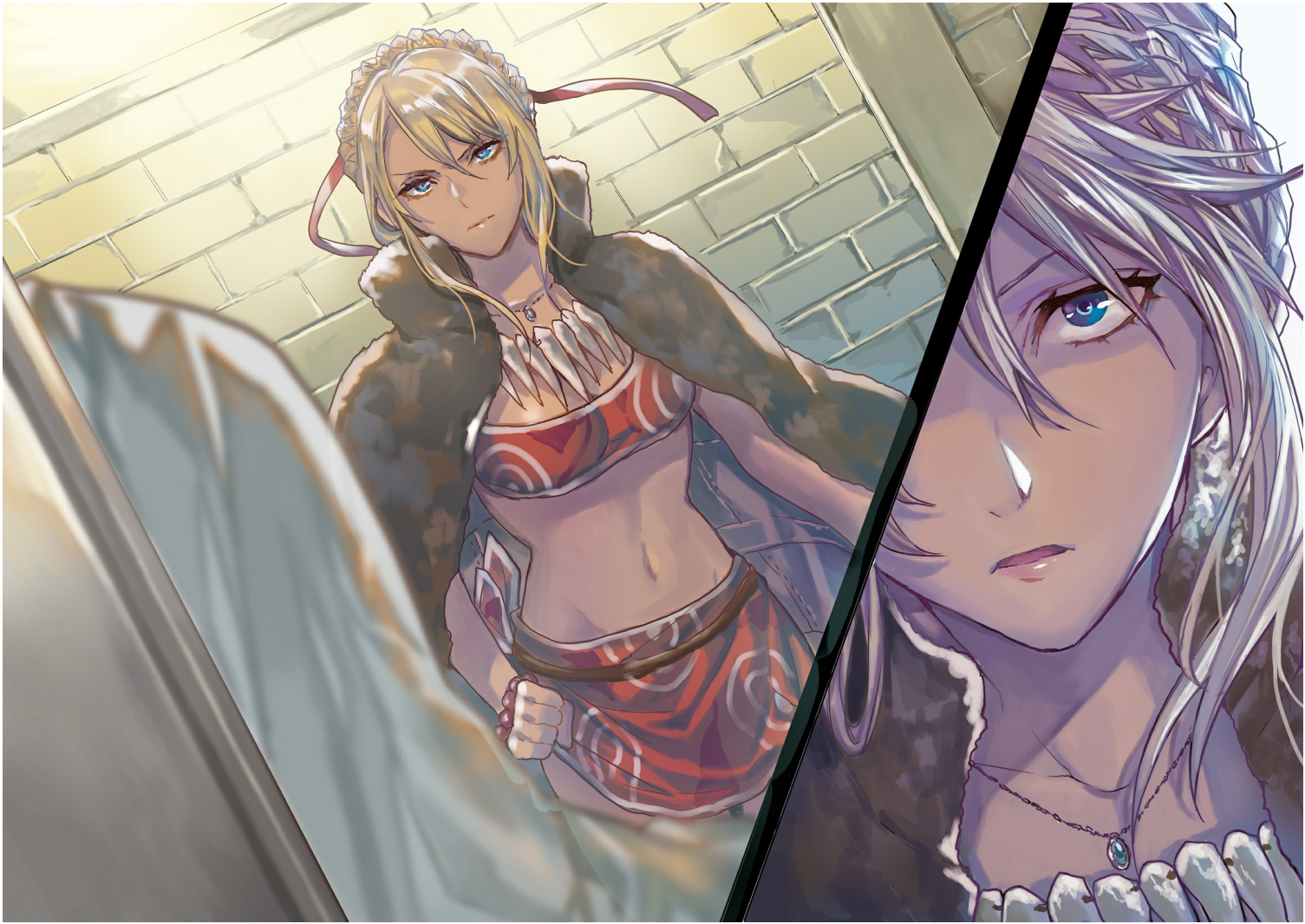




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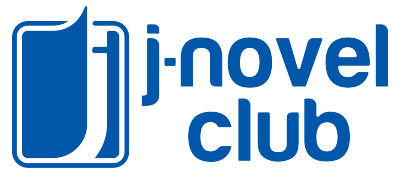
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Cooking with Wild Game: Volume 13

by EDA

Translated by Matthew Warner Edited by Adam Fogle

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